

This is a Jixemetri Circle Writing Project #8 entry. The title is from The Mamas and The Papas song of the same name. Mucho, mucho thanks to Susan for her advice on how to understand Brian's feelings when I had my doubts as to their believability. And, of course, a big Bob-White thanks to her for performing one of her fabulous edits!

California Dreamin'

by Dana

"Jim, I'm worried about Brian," Trixie said as she leaned back into her boyfriend's arms. Jim Frayne was home from Michigan State for the long Thanksgiving weekend, and the high school senior and college junior were ensconced in the Wheeler study Friday afternoon, trying to find some "alone time." The festival atmosphere of the annual Belden Thanksgiving Open House the previous day hadn't allowed them any time together, just the two of them, so now the couple was happily settled in the study's love seat, snuggled in each other's arms. "I Wanna Hold Your Hand" by the Beatles was playing quietly in the background.

"He hasn't seemed like himself in quite a while," Jim conceded, thinking of Trixie's brother and his best friend. "He was kind of withdrawn this past summer."

"I know. And every time I tried to talk to him about it, he clammed up. Something happened at school last year, and he won't talk about it. And whatever it is, it's not getting any better," Trixie fretted.

"If I didn't know better, I'd say that Honey and Dan's romance was bothering him," Jim offered.

"I know. I thought of that, too," Trixie said, a worried frown on her normally cheerful face. "It almost seemed like that last spring, and he was particularly grumpy during Sleepyside's prom night last May, but over the summer, he seemed to accept them just fine. I mean, I got the feeling that he was unhappy, but it was more of a 'left out' feeling than a specific 'jealous of Honey and Dan' feeling. I mean, we all *were* happily paired off." Trixie sighed, thinking of how her brother must have felt. "Except for him," she finished in a dejected voice.

Jim echoed his girlfriend's sigh. "I know. I tried to make him feel comfortable and not like a seventh wheel, and I know Honey and Dan made a special effort as well, but I don't think it helped all that much." Jim did have *some* insight into Brian's mood. He looked intently at Trixie, trying to debate whether or not relaying some of what Brian had told him would be breaking a trust. But then, Brian had never told him not to tell anyone.

Trixie was tenacious, he knew, and if she got it into her head that she was worried about Brian, she would hound him and never let him have a moment's peace until she found out what was wrong. Better to tell Trixie a little bit, which in truth was all Jim knew himself, rather than having her pester her older brother.

"Okay, I'm going to tell you something, and this is so you won't bother Brian, okay?" Jim looked earnestly at his girlfriend.

"When am I ever a bother?" Trixie's clear blue eyes sparkled, but on seeing Jim's features remain firm while he gazed at her, she quickly became serious and amended, "Okay, I promise. I won't bother Brian—if what you have to tell me doesn't make me worry even more."

Jim nodded and continued, "Last year, Brian fell in love with a girl, and she fell in love with him. They were really happy until her father got sick, and she had to leave Columbia and move back to California. He misses her, and I don't think he's quite gotten over her."

Trixie felt a quiet sadness settle over her as she realized her brother had lost someone he loved. She did not know what she would do if she ever lost Jim. She also felt bad for his girlfriend, left to worry about a parent's health and sacrificing a lot to do so. "That's awful. I wish there was something we could do."

Jim kissed Trixie's forehead tenderly. "I know you do, Miss Fix It, but unfortunately, there's nothing anyone can do. Lexi is back in L.A. caring for her invalid father and she doesn't think it's fair to Brian to pine over

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her, so she broke it off completely. They don't speak at all. I think she thought that would be best for Brian, so he would get over her, but obviously that's not happening."

"There must be *something* we can do..." Trixie said, and then trailed off as she looked at Jim's stern face.

"You know one of the reasons I love you, Sapphire Girl, is because of your generous spirit and your desire to help others, but if Brian wanted help, he would have asked for it. Remember, you promised not to bother Brian if I told you what I suspected was wrong."

Trixie nodded. "I know, I know. But you know I hate to see other people unhappy, and when it's my very own brother..." Trixie shrugged out of a feeling of impotence.

Jim squeezed her tighter, "I know, but you've got to let this one be. If Brian and Lexi are meant to be together, then they will be someday. If they're not, then Brian will meet some fabulous girl and be happy with her."

Trixie looked at her boyfriend, love and pride apparent in the depths of her ocean blue eyes. "When did you get to be so smart, Jim Frayne?"

The two smiled at each other and then, taking advantage of the rare privacy they had carved for themselves, their lips met and Brian and his problems were temporarily forgotten.

~*~*~*~*~

Brian walked into his dorm room and threw his backpack down on the floor. He had just completed his last final and had three more days before the dorms closed for the December break. The college junior was feeling at odds about that. Columbia University gave its students almost a month off for winter break, and Brian did not want to stay in Sleepside for that long. He didn't feel as though he fit in there anymore. He had tried to be rational about the whole thing, but seeing the three happy Bob-White couples still bothered him. He hated feeling like the seventh-wheel and seeing their happiness only reminded him of the happiness he had lost.

Lexi had left his life the previous April, and here it was December, and Brian still could not forget her. He had filled the cracks of his life with studying for his demanding upper level science classes, carving out extra studying time for his upcoming medical school admissions exam, and carrying out the responsibilities of his Resident Assistant job. As busy as Brian was, with barely a spare moment to eat or sleep, he had learned one thing. No matter what he did, no matter how he filled his time, memories of Lexi still haunted him. It was as if he had put his heart in a deep freeze; he was only avoiding dealing with the loss of Lexi and not actually doing anything productive to move past the hurt and the heartache. Time continued to pass, but he obtained no resolution. Why else would a two-month relationship continue to be such a source of pain so many months later?

Before Brian could work himself into a more depressed state, he heard pounding feet in the hall outside his room and someone shouting, "I know you stole my towels, Mark! I'm going to get you for this! And we're out of toilet paper, too!"

Brian actually allowed himself a chuckle as he listened to the craziness of life in the dorms. Sometimes the underclassmen exasperated him with their antics, but most of the time he found that he enjoyed the spontaneity of the students who lived on his floor. It kept him from feeling ancient, something he had been fighting ever since he had been in high school and known as "the responsible, older one."

He took off the burnished red winter boots that always seemed to squeak, even when they were perfectly dry, and threw himself on his single bed. He used the nearby remote to turn on the television set in his room. His parents had splurged on his birthday, and Brian was grateful that he could catch up on the news in his room. There was always someone in the dorm lounge watching TV, and no one ever seemed to want

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to watch the news. It was already ten to six and the early news was finishing up, so Brian settled into catch up with the day's happenings around the metro area.

"...The couple, caught having sex in Central Park, were charged with indecent exposure and public lewdness and released. Their hula hoop was confiscated and impounded by park police," a perfectly coifed local anchorwoman was reporting.

"A hula hoop?" Brian said out loud to no one in particular. He shook his head and watched as the camera now focused on a plastic-looking anchorman.

"An elderly couple near Croton-on-Hudson found a priceless painting hidden in the gatehouse located on their manor estate. The Renoir, believed to have been smuggled out of France just before Nazi occupation in the late 1930's, was found in good condition. Representatives from the Louvre Museum in Paris are en route to New York to take possession of the Impressionist work of art."

Brian shook his head, thinking of the priceless diamond that Trixie and Honey had found in the gatehouse of Honey's manor estate. "I really need to invest in an estate with a gatehouse," he said aloud, for some reason immensely enjoying talking to himself this evening. He suddenly turned up the television as he caught the beginning of the next news story.

"Slim Novarski, originally from Cobbett's Island, was held up at gunpoint as he passed through the park. The house painter happened to have no cash on him and presented the would-be thief with the only thing in his pockets—a cigar. The barefoot thief, later identified as one Joe March, then demanded that Novarski give him his shoes. Novarski complied, and the thief hurriedly put the shoes on and tried to make a getaway. However, the shoes were too large, and March tripped and fell, knocking himself unconscious. The perpetrator's gun—later found to be a toy gun—clattered into nearby bushes. Novarski immediately jumped into action and sat on the thief until help arrived."

Brian sat, stunned, not only listening to the ridiculousness of the story, but also surprised to see Slim Novarski, who had once tried to steal money from the Bob-Whites before they could return it to the rightful owners, being interviewed on television. He still looked much the same as he had a few years ago and was wearing painter's overalls covered in splattered paint. He seemed to enjoy his fifteen minutes of fame as he recounted the attempted mugging.

"I don't know what he thought he was going to find, hidden gold or what, but all I had was a cigar." Slim shrugged. "I feel sorry for him. I used to be like him, but fortunately, I learned a long time ago that thievin' ain't the way to go."

Brian smiled to think that the Bob-Whites had had a little to do with Slim's transformation.

The image on the TV switched back to the studios, where the perfect anchor people traded witty comments with plastic smiles. "And now, a bit about the controversy brewing at the Museum of Modern Art. Apparently, renowned artist Inigo Montoya's latest exhibition, entitled 'Porno Cacti' is causing a bit of a stir. We now go live to correspondent Cookie Cutter, standing by at the museum. Cookie?"

Brian groaned and turned off the TV. Maybe he'd wait until the national news at seven so that he could get some serious news. He stood and casually stretched before absentmindedly picking up a single sock off the floor and tossing it into his dirty clothes hamper. He was about to head down to the dorm rec room when his phone rang.

He answered the phone and was greeted by a frantic male voice.

"Dude! Thank God you're in! I'm totally locked out of my room, and I have a final in, like, ten minutes and the front desk won't lend me the spare key! They say they're afraid I won't return it!"

Brian sighed as he recognized the voice of Spud, a freshman on his floor. "Is Angela working?"

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"Hey! Are one of you Angela?" Brian heard Spud call out. A moment later, the freshman confirmed that Angela was indeed present.

"Tell Angela to give you the key. I'll meet you at your room and return it to her myself."

"Dude! Thanks!"

Brian chuckled as he realized he was listening to a dial tone. He hung up his phone and headed down the hall to meet Spud. On the way, he noticed shards of broken glass in the hallway and sighed. He had just walked by there not fifteen minutes before. "When did that happen?" he muttered to himself and continued on to Spud's room.

The lanky freshman, out of breath from his sprint up four flights of stairs, arrived at the door to his room just as Brian did.

"Brian, you totally rock, dude. Thanks!" Spud left the spare key in the lock, ran into his room, grabbed his backpack, and was heading back down the hall in the blink of an eye.

"No problem!" Brian called.

"I totally owe you a beer, dude!" Spud called as he disappeared around the corner.

Brian had to laugh. It was either that or spend the next six months constantly frustrated at Spud's scatterbrained antics. The R.A. closed the freshman's door, locked it, and headed down to the front desk to return the spare key.

The pretty senior who worked part-time at the front desk saw Brian coming and greeted him warmly. "Hi, Brian! I'm sorry to drag you down here, but you must understand why we couldn't give Spud the key, right?"

"I understand, Angela. The chances of you getting it back would be dicey at best," Brian said as he handed the brunette the key. "Can you also get Maintenance up to the fourth floor? There's some broken glass in the hallway."

Angela rolled her eyes. "We were never this bad as freshman, right?" she said rhetorically as she reached for the phone and called Maintenance. She hung up a moment later and reported that someone would be up within the next half hour to clean up the glass.

"Thanks, Angela," Brian said as he started to turn away and head back up to his room.

"No problem, Brian. Hey, what plans do you have for Christmas break? Are you going home?"

Brian turned back to his friend. "Yeah, I'm going to hang around here until the dorms close and then head back to Sleepyside. What about you?"

Angela gave him a big grin. "California, here I come!"

At the mention of California, Brian's heart plummeted, but he somehow managed to smile at Angela.

"That's great. Have a good time."

"I will. You, too," the part-time receptionist said and then, with a good-bye wave, turned to answer a ringing phone.

Brian trudged back up the four flights of stairs to his floor with a heavy heart.

California.

What he wouldn't do to go to California and see Lexi. He entered his room and lay down on the bed. The urge, the strong urge that he had battled a thousand times before, came crashing down upon him in waves. Brian fought against it, knowing that he couldn't call Lexi. He gripped his pillow, wondering why the urge to

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call her grew greater and greater as the months went on. It shouldn't be this way. He had only been with her for two months. He should be over her by now. Brian had told himself that a thousand—no, a million—times over the months, but his heart didn't seem to want to listen.

Suddenly, Brian had a thought. "Why *can't* I call her?" he wondered aloud. "Dammit. I'm going to call her." The college junior jumped to his feet and strode purposefully over to his phone. As he reached it, he faltered.

"She doesn't want you to call her, Brian," he told himself. "She doesn't want *you*." But Brian didn't believe that. He knew what he and Lexi shared, though brief, was real. Not just to him, but to her as well. Even though he hadn't spoken to her in months, somewhere deep inside, he knew she still loved him.

Then, on the heels of this thought, the ugly doubts reared again. "Wishful thinking, Belden." Brian stared at his hand on the phone for a long time, contemplating what the "right" thing to do was. Finally, with a deep breath, he lifted the phone from its cradle and dialed the number he knew by heart.

She answered on the third ring.

Brian felt an indescribable wave of pleasure course through his body at the sound of her sweet voice. "Lexi," he breathed.

Silence met his single word of greeting, and Brian held his breath, awaiting her reaction.

"Brian." That single word, his name, spoken by Lexi caused him to close his eyes and sink to the floor. He could hear the tears in her voice and it tore him apart.

"I'm sorry. I had to hear your voice," he said, settling himself on the floor near the phone.

"It's okay. I've...I've been needing to hear your voice, too, Brian," Lexi confessed.

"How have you been?" Brian wondered.

"I've been better." The tears in Lexi's voice were clearly audible now. Brian was afraid to ask about her father, but he knew he had to.

"And your father?"

There was a sharp intake of breath, and Brian feared the worst. A small sob preceded Lexi's next words. "He died 23 days ago, Brian. He had another stroke and he never recovered."

"Lexi, oh my God, Lexi. I'm so sorry. Sweetie, baby, why didn't you call? I would have been there in a heartbeat for you," Brian said, his eyes wet with tears shed for a man he had never met.

"I wanted to, Brian, like you wouldn't believe, but I...I couldn't. Not after..."

"Lexi, yes, you could," Brian interrupted her with his emphatic statement. "I want to be there for you. I want you to call me if you need me. You know that don't you?"

"I know. I mean, logically, I know that. But after I just ended things like...I did, I didn't want to...bother you," Lexi explained, groping for the right words. Her mind, normally so occupied with grief that half the time she didn't know what was up or what was down, was actually filled with a sense of relief hearing Brian's voice.

"You're not a bother. Ever. I'm coming out there," Brian declared impulsively.

Lexi closed her eyes and gathered up all of the strength that she possessed. "No," she choked out, even as she said the word wanting to shout "Yes!"

"Why not?" Brian demanded.

"I've got so much to do. There is so much to be done. I'm all my dad had and now I need to handle everything myself."

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"Which is exactly why you need me out there," Brian reasoned. "Let me help you. Let me be there for you."

Again, Alexandria fought with all of her might not to say what she really wanted. She wanted Brian out in California with her more than she could bear, but she would *not*, under any circumstances, get in the way of his pre-medical degree at Columbia. "Brian, I'm fine," she lied. "I can handle this, and I don't need any distractions. Besides, it's almost Christmas. You need to be with your family."

Brian paused. She *did* sound very determined. "I can do both," he finally said. "I can come visit you and then be at Crabapple Farm in time for the holidays. I didn't want to stay there for the whole break anyway."

Lexi closed her eyes. "Brian," she said with as much conviction as she could muster. "I have too many things to finalize here and I don't need you. You'd only get in the way." She hated to say those awful words to him, but if Brian came out to California, she knew she wouldn't be strong enough to let him leave when the time came.

On his end, Brian felt as though he'd been slapped. But the message was finally sinking in—she didn't want him. His whole being sagged as the realization fell upon him like a two-ton weight. He fought to keep his voice even. "I understand. I'm sorry, Lexi, I only wanted to help. I certainly don't want to be a burden to you."

Lexi fought tears and bit her tongue to keep from crying out that he wasn't a burden, that she wanted to see him, to hold him, more than anything on this earth. Instead, she simply said quietly, "Thank you for understanding, Brian." And then, unable to keep all of her feelings inside she added, "It's not that I don't want to see you, Brian. But now just isn't a good time."

"Please take care of yourself, and call me if you need me. I still love you, Lexi, and I just want what's best for you."

"I know you do. And I love you and want what's best for you, too. Have a wonderful holiday with your family. Good-bye." Lexi hung up quickly, knowing she was starting to lose control. She collapsed into a nearby chair and began to sob.

Brian carefully hung up the receiver and desperately tried to ignore the pain in his heart.

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Three days later, Brian stood at a bus stop near his dorm, his backpack and suitcase sitting next to him. He crossed his arms and hunched his shoulders to try to battle against the cold that seeped in around his ski coat, hat, and gloves. Three buses had stopped already, but when he read the destinations displayed on the front of the bus, he saw that none would take him to Penn Station. He hopped up and down slightly, trying to remember the last time New York had seen a winter this frigid. There had been very little snow, but the air had been downright glacial for three straight days now.

Finally, the bus that would take him to Penn Station arrived, and Brian trundled aboard with his baggage, eager to be out of the frosty December air. He quickly found a seat and stared unseeingly out the window during the drive to the train station, only one thing on his mind. The only thing he had been able to think about since hanging up the phone three days ago.

Alexandria Drayton. Lexi.

Brian sighed and replayed the conversation in his mind as he had been for over seventy-two hours. He could hear her voice saying, "And I love you and want what's best for you, too." He remembered the quiet desperation with which she said it and *knew* there was more to the story. Despite her words, Brian still could not believe that she didn't want him out in California. Her words said that, but her voice, despite the overture of fatigue and grief, had still been full of love and warmth. She still had the misguided notion that she was protecting him by keeping him away from her.

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The bus engine sighed noisily as it pulled up to the Penn Station stop, seemingly echoing Brian's sigh of frustration as he realized what Lexi was trying to do. He gathered his bags and headed toward the ticket window to buy his train ticket.

He waited impatiently in line, thinking of the train ride ahead, and when it was finally his turn, he marched determinedly up to the window.

"One ticket to Los Angeles, California," he stated in a loud, clear voice.

*All the leaves are brown and the sky is gray
I've been for a walk on a winter's day
I'd be safe and warm if I was in L.A.
California dreamin' on such a winter's day*

*Stopped in to a church I passed along the way
Well I got down on my knees and I pretend to pray
You know the preacher liked the cold
He knows I'm gonna stay
California dreamin' on such a winter's day*

*All the leaves are brown and the sky is gray
I've been for a walk on a winter's day
If I didn't tell her I could leave today
California dreamin' on such a winter's day
California dreamin' on such a winter's day
California dreamin' on such a winter's day*

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My carryover items were: sex in a park (#1), hula hoop(#2), the phrase "We're out of toilet paper" shouted by someone (#3), someone locked out of a room making a frantic phone call (SA#1), a single sock (#4), shattered glass (#5), backpack (SA#2), stolen towels (#6), red footwear that makes a noise (#7), splattered paint (SA#3).

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