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# Side Effects

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*Side Effects*

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Senior Thesis

Professor Kiese Laymon

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## Side Effects

I'm sitting in the emergency room of the local hospital and it's stupidly cold. I'm thinking vaguely that someone should probably do something about that. Mark sits next to me and leans forward in his chair, staring down at his clasped hands, knees jiggling.

We're here because of our father. Because of Dad. He's a pretty shitty parent, I think, and it's his thoughtless attitude that led to two-thirds of his children sitting here in a poorly lit room where colored plastic chairs offer the highest level of excitement, waiting for a doctor to come tell us the result of a surgery I already know he's not going to survive. Robert isn't here and I don't know whether it's because he doesn't care or doesn't know. I sure as hell didn't call him. Either way, I'm glad he's not with us right now. I can handle him with middle fingers and stiff-necked silences, but Mark doesn't need to deal with our brother marching in here like he owns the place. Robert has the sick ability to find anyone's weak point, especially in times of stress, and worry away at it just for the cruel satisfaction of seeing his victim break apart. Mark doesn't need the toxic presence our brother carries with him like influenza.

Mark doesn't need a lot of things, to be honest. He doesn't need more strain, doesn't need more anxiety, and he doesn't need to sit here and be reminded, with each passing second, that our dad is lying in a room out of sight, but not too far away, being cut open by metal knives or whatever it is they're doing in there because of a handful of tiny *pills*.

Our dad became addicted to cigarettes – the only legal product that kills when used as intended – when we lived in Paris. It was a way to cope with stress from his

job at the embassy, I think. Mom was still alive at this point, but two months after he took up the habit she died. The medical jargon surrounding her death confused me, but I knew her lungs had been failing for a while. She wasn't big on cigarettes, so I thought it might have had something to do with the secondhand smoke she inhaled from my dad. When I tried to talk to him about it afterward he would throw the nearest object at me, no matter how expensive – or heavy – it was. Eventually I stopped asking.

Now it's Dad who's dying. Indirectly it's because of cigarettes, but directly it's because of side effects. About three months ago they released a little blue capsule to the public that's designed to curb cigarette addiction. Dad decided to try it and went to get briefed. He didn't want us to come, but Mark was worried and insisted on going. I went with him. We listened to a practitioner talk about the possible side effects of the pills, about *joint pain* and *taste perversion* and *skin rash* and *transient ischemic atychosis*.

Mark covers his mouth with his hand. It jolts me out of the memory. "Mark," I say. He doesn't hear me. I sigh and lean over to grasp his hand, pulling it to rest on my knee. He looks up, startled. "Mark," I repeat, and he still doesn't answer. "Are you nauseated?"

He looks down at his knees. "I'm fine," he mumbles, and I know he's not. He's remembering those little pills of his own.

"Sixty-three days," I say.

"Sixty-two," he replies, murmuring.

"Sixty-three," I maintain.

He looks up at me, a crease in his forehead. "Are you sure?"

I squeeze his hand. “Yeah, I’m sure. Today counts too, you know.”

He looks away and takes his hand back. It’s shaking slightly. “It doesn’t matter right now,” he says. “Dad’s more important.”

“Of course it matters,” I persist. He opens his mouth to argue, but I continue. “I wish you’d start acknowledging what you’ve accomplished already. Give yourself some credit, for God’s sake. Two months is a long time. Dad couldn’t go without smoking for half that long.”

He looks down, hands pressed together, and shivers. “Dad belongs to an older generation,” he protests weakly. “He wasn’t as informed about smoking as I was about – ” He cuts himself off.

“Right,” I spit out savagely. “Because laxative dependency is a sign that the abuser is weak and pathetic for succumbing to societal pressure, but when someone can’t find it within them to stop poisoning their children with secondhand smoke we’re supposed to give them all the fucking support in the world, is that it?”

“Cassie. Please don’t.” I quiet myself with difficulty and glare out at nothing, hating the way the room goes silent after we stop talking. We’re the only two in here besides the receptionist. Grandmommy and Papa are dead (heart disease, the both of them) and so are Nana and Granddad (lung cancer and pneumonia, respectively). There’s no other family to speak of – there aren’t even any friends. It’s pathetic.

I focus on the sound of rain outside, imagining what the falling water looks like. I remember the nurse saying *nosebleed, back pain, double vision, agitation*. I remember the irritated press of Dad’s lips. I remember what he looked like when we lived in Paris. Sometimes when I came home from school he’d be inhaling smoke like nobody’s business, standing on the corner in front of our house – probably

because he was tired of fighting with my mom, who didn't like that he lit cigarettes inside. The picture was especially striking in winter. When I got home it would be dark, and Dad would be leaning against the metal fence in front of our house with a cancer stick wedged between his thick fingers. It was always the cigarette I saw first, rigid and pale and trapped in the embrace of its abuser. I remember hating the way the embers glowed.

I don't remember us getting a lot of snow. More often than not my memories of those winter evenings feature water dripping down the gutters, glistening like cheap metal and sparkling like grit on the concrete sidewalks. And there was Dad, stuck in the middle of it all, killing himself slowly with hot smoke even as he shivered in the cold.

The rain is a steady beat in my memory. It fades until it's replaced by the water that's falling from the sky right now, right outside this little room Mark and I are sitting in, and then it's just my mind repeating itself, repeating *impotence, mood swings, hair loss, phototoxicity*.

"When is Rob getting here?" Mark asks. His face is pale and tense.

"I didn't know he was coming," I answer, trying not to sound too irritated by his naïve hope. "Did you call him?"

"Yes," says Mark, and doesn't look at me. He often doesn't look at people when he speaks to them.

I rub my teeth together. "Did he say he was coming for sure?" I ask. Mark doesn't respond, and I guess that's our answer. I sigh. "He's probably busy. Running his own business and everything."

Mark tugs at my ponytail, a small quirk to his mouth. “You shouldn’t be so cynical, Cas. Maybe his flight got delayed.”

*Delayed reaction time, I think. Dizziness, hypersomnia, blurred vision.*

I shake the echo of the words away and turn to look at my brother. Our family shares blue eyes – except Mom; hers were green – and when I need to get something across to Mark I focus on the color of his irises so as not to concentrate on what I’m saying and how much it will hurt him. “Robert isn’t coming,” I say firmly, trying to be as gentle as possible. Mark closes his eyes and puts a hand over his mouth reflexively like he always does when he’s upset. When he’s nauseated.

*Constipation, diarrhea, indigestion,* rambles the nurse in my head. *Kidney failure, urinary retention, rectal bleeding.* “When was the last time you ate?” I ask.

“Lunch,” Mark answers weakly, and opens his eyes.

I squeeze his shoulder. “Good.”

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Robert has brown hair. It makes me uncomfortable to look at him because brown hair and blue eyes seem strange together. Still, he’s a handsome guy with smooth skin and a malicious smile. I picture his face while I’m on the phone with him, stuck in a waiting room chair with Mark beside me. “Why didn’t you call me, Sis?” Robert asks. The sound is half him, half static.

I rub my free hand across my arm, because the room is still fucking freezing. “Mark called you. I didn’t need to.” The words come out flat. At the sound of his name, Mark glances at my face and then at the cellphone in my hand.

There’s some shuffling in the background, like Robert’s sorting papers. “Fine, fine. You hate me, I get it.”

“Why are you calling me?”

There’s more shuffling. “I wanted to check on Mark.”

I stand and walk a few yards away. “On Mark?” I keep my voice soft so the person in question doesn’t hear me.

“Yeah,” says Robert simply, his voice distorted with static.

I continue moving until I’m staring at the receptionist’s desk and the pasty white wall behind it. “What about Dad?”

“Like I give a tiny rat’s ass about Dad,” Robert says offhandedly, a dismissal. “He’s been dead on his feet for years. Just tell me – how’s Squirt doing?”

I glance at Mark, who’s sitting where I left him. “He’s okay. I think.”

“Any nausea?”

I’m getting a headache. “Some. I don’t think it’s too bad.”

“Okay. Keep me updated. And don’t let him do anything stupid.” He hangs up before I can reply.

Mark’s blond-brown hair is falling in front of his eyes when I get back. He swipes it away from his forehead and, surprisingly, doesn’t ask about the call. “You need a haircut,” I remark. He stays silent as he so often does, and my mind flashes back to Paris, how I would pay for his haircuts and we would get ice cream afterward. Random images come at me: Robert fixing a bike in Ottawa – Mark’s or mine, I can’t remember – Mom watering flowers in Oslo, Dad standing silent at her funeral in Paris. That last one remains with me, vibrating through my head. I remember him gazing down at the open casket, eyes carelessly dull, charcoal suit tailored to perfection. One shoe presented a thoughtless scuff, and I spent hours after the service wondering whether it was an oversight on his part or simply a trick of the

light. After they put my mother in the ground one of Dad's colleagues, a French diplomat, came up to him and told him – quite bluntly – that he was going to pay the price for his smoking sooner or later, and didn't he owe it to his wife's memory to at least try to stop?

*“J'ai déjà payé le prix,”* my father replied. *I have already paid the price.*

The thought is cut apart when Mark's head snaps up. I follow his gaze to see a doctor emerging from a door laden with a thick coat of white paint. It shuts slowly, cutting us off from the world where lives are saved and lost, and I focus on the doctor's shoes clicking unnervingly against the white floor. I know what she's going to say before she opens her mouth: “I'm sorry.” Mark takes my hand and squeezes it hard.

She goes on to talk about *toxic epidermal necrolysis* and *pancreatic inflammation* – the specific side effects that killed our father – but it's not her I see in front of me. It's Dad, standing on a Parisian corner in the rain, smothered in cigarette smoke and trying to breathe, flashing through my mind over and over and over again.

## Playing House

Marcus Taylor, born and raised in the small town of Grosner, is uncomfortable returning home. Eighteen years in this place (and more than two at Harvard) have not been able to teach him how to deal with its inhabitants.

His father, busy with work, does not pick him up from the airport. Neither does his sister Gabriella, who's picking up a friend and said friend's brother from the hospital. She sends other friends of hers to collect him, two boys he remembers as freshmen from when he was a senior in high school. He walks out of baggage claim to see one of them waving at him with a grin, brown hair like a mop on his head, and the other one rubbing at his forehead and looking like he'd rather be anywhere else.

The ride home is long.

They park in front of Marcus' old house, walk up to the front door, and immediately realize they have a dilemma in that the door is locked, Marcus' dad is not home, and Marcus doesn't have a key. And so, he is reduced to sitting on the porch of his own house with two practical strangers, watching the paint peel as the autumn wind attacks him and waiting for his little sister to come home and let him in. One of the boys – Jason – lit a cigarette at some point and has been taking drags for the past few minutes. The smoke feels like it's scratching at Marcus' lungs.

“So,” he says, for the sake of interrupting the murmurs the two boys have been exchanging. “My sister should be back soon.” He actually has no way of knowing this, since Gabriella won't answer her phone, but he doesn't know what else to say. He tucks his gloveless hands under his armpits. “Do – either of you have siblings?” he continues lamely.

“Nope. I’m an unhappy only child,” Jason proclaims cheerfully, tilting his head and smiling softly. Marcus can’t think of anything to say. Jason turns to the other boy – Parker – and when the latter does nothing except pick at lint on his jeans, Jason shoves him.

Parker looks up. “I have a cousin,” he says, and offers no more. There’s a dog tag hanging from his neck, the silver standing out against his dark skin.

Marcus flounders. “Oh?” There’s silence, and he fiddles with the handles of his bag. “What does he – she – um. What do they do?”

“She’s in the bin,” says Parker, and swipes at the skin under one of his eyes.

Marcus’ gaze flickers between the two boys uncertainly as he twists his hands together. They’ve turned red and cracked from the cold.

Jason happens to glance up and catch his eye. Marcus looks at him helplessly, waiting for elaboration. “The loony bin,” Jason clarifies slowly, and taps his cigarette so that ash falls into the front yard. There’s a thick black ring on his right hand.

Marcus reels back. “The – the *loony bin*?” He had no idea people still used those kinds of terms, even in a town like this.

Parker reaches forward, slips the cigarette out from between Jason’s fingers, and crushes it beneath his boot, ignoring his friend’s protests. Ash smears across the porch floor and Jason glares at him halfheartedly. “I was smoking that, dude.”

“I apologize for your slightly extended lifespan,” Parker drawls, and meets his friend’s scowl with an unconcerned expression.

Marcus’ hands twist and twist together. “Your cousin,” he says, wanting to know more, for some reason. “She’s – she’s in the hospital?”

Parker's gaze flicks to him, expression unreadable, dark eyes still. "Seven months and counting."

*Say something, Marcus*, he thinks to himself. "That's – I'm sorry," he manages.

"Don't be." Parker's unflinching gaze is making him uncomfortable. "She's not coming out."

Jason puts a hand on his friend's shoulder, his touch light. "Don't say that, man. She could be getting better."

"She hears voices," says Parker, so sharply it makes Marcus wince. "She has an imaginary boyfriend she doesn't know isn't real."

"What's her name?" asks Marcus quickly. His heart is pounding.

"Danielle," says Parker shortly, and starts picking at the peeling paint of the porch railing. Marcus takes a small amount of comfort in the fact that he's apparently not the only one who doesn't make good conversation.

"Do you – go and visit her?" he asks.

"No." Parker's muscles are tense.

Marcus is taken aback. "You – oh. That's –"

"Cruel?" asks Parker, staring at him. "She hardly cares about me. I'll go and see her and she'll talk about colors and walls closing in and boys who play musical instruments. My aunt visits enough for the two of us."

"Oh," says Marcus. "That's...nice." He should probably stop talking now.

"Where did you put my cigarettes, man?" asks Jason, looking around as though expecting a pack to materialize.

"You don't need them," says Parker, and reaches down to tie his shoelaces.

No one says anything for a few long moments. Marcus wonders if Gabriella has managed to die on her way back from the hospital. “Um,” he says, and both boys look at him. “You don’t need to wait with me.”

Jason waves his hand. “We need to get some notes from Gabriella. It’s for a group project.”

Marcus’ reply becomes stillborn when the sounds of a car rounding the corner meet his ears. He turns his head to see the dull grey of the family car approaching them. Jason stands and stretches. Gabriella pulls into the driveway.

Marcus watches his sister get out of the vehicle, boots appearing first before her hand grips the door, nails painted bright red. Her hair is falling out of its bun and the car door rattles when she shuts it.

Her smile is crooked when she sees him. He opens his arms, and she walks right into them. “Hey, Markie,” she half whispers, and he pats her back awkwardly.

“Aw,” says Jason from the background, hands clasped together in front of his chest. “A brother-sister reunion! How sweet.” Parker punches him in the shoulder.

Gabriella steps back and gives her brother a onceover, her long turquoise earrings whistling in the wind. “You look cold,” she says finally.

“That’s because it’s forty degrees out here,” Jason pipes in helpfully. Gabriella gives him a look and moves to unlock the door.

The house is dim as always and Marcus squints as he walks into the front room. Somehow, nothing seems to have changed since his mother lived here. The house is full of pastel colors and inspirational signs that say things like “Faith is taking the first step even when you can’t see the whole staircase,” which Marcus always thought was a limited metaphor in that it doesn’t care about people who rely

on crutches or wheelchairs. The house isn't big, and it seems like someone has bashed in parts of the walls and painted over them poorly with various shades of pink that don't match the original color. His mom always used to talk about improving the house, redoing the walls and tidying up the garden out front, but the truth is she was never able to take two steps outside the front door without having a panic attack and some days she couldn't even make it out of her room. They don't talk about it.

“So,” says Marcus, examining the fraying edges of the living room rug. “Is your friend okay? The – one you picked up from the hospital?”

“I think so,” says Gabriella, sounding tired. “Her dad died.”

Parker turns away from where he was staring at a dark portrait of a stern, older woman. “Which friend is this?” he asks. “Monica?”

Gabriella shakes her head, loose curls flying. “Cassie,” she says.

“Is she the one who just moved here?” asks Jason, though he doesn't seem to be paying much attention, taking in his surroundings instead while he switches between supporting his weight with the balls and the heels of his feet.

Gabriella nods, and then gestures toward the staircase. “My notes for the project are on my desk. You can just go and get them,” she tells the boys. Jason nods and bounces toward the stairs. Parker follows at a more sedate pace.

Gabriella turns to her brother and there's a pause. Marcus decides to smile. She smiles back. “So,” she says. “How was your flight?”

Marcus hates small talk. “Um. Good?” he says, like it's a question.

Gabriella looks at her feet, and then glances up toward the ceiling, where Marcus can hear the sounds of Jason's laughter leaking through. She sighs. "Look, Marcus. I know you're wondering why I asked you to come home so suddenly."

Marcus shifts on his feet and runs a hand through his thick hair. "I – I have wondered," he admits.

She rubs the back of her neck and glances away from him, toward where the wall is cracking. "You have to promise not to judge me, okay?" Her voice wavers the slightest bit.

He blinks at her, thinking that he can't really make that promise. What if she's murdered someone, after all? What if she's selling medical marijuana? Why is she putting this kind of pressure on him?

"I won't judge you," he says anyway.

She sighs, fidgets, and sighs again. "Marcus," she says finally, and reaches out with thin fingers and scarred knuckles to clasp his hands so tightly it hurts. "I think I'm pregnant."

From upstairs, Jason laughs again. Distractedly, Marcus wonders why he keeps doing that, whether Parker could possibly be saying something remotely close to funny. His sister goes blurry in front of him as he blinks, and blinks again.

"You're pregnant," he repeats dully. It's all he can do.

She bites her lip. "Look, I – I know I shouldn't have done it, but – the father is a lot older than me and he won't help and you just – I had to tell you, okay? I had to tell you in person. You have to help me. Dad will kill me if he finds out, you know he will. And I don't – it's been a month. Since it happened. What do I do, Marcus?"

Marcus clears his throat. “You – um,” he says. “Are you going to get an abortion?”

“I don’t know,” she hisses. “I don’t *know*. That’s what you have to tell me. Can I do it without Dad finding out?” She chews on her chapped bottom lip. “How guilty will I feel if I do it?”

“I – how guilty did you feel when you accidentally vacuumed up your hamster in eighth grade?” he asks, trying to think logically. “Because, comparatively, you’d probably feel four to five times worse than that if you terminated a human life.” She stares at him. “That was eighth grade, wasn’t it?” he asks uncertainly.

Gabriella lets go of him and presses her fingers into her temples. “I can’t make this kind of decision,” she says slowly, clearly. A tear slips down her face and she’s starting to look slightly hysterical. Marcus has no idea what to say, or what to do with the quiet that’s closing in on them.

It stretches on.

“All right, we have the notes!”

Jason’s loud voice slices through their silence, his feet pounding down the stairs like he weighs 260 pounds instead of 160. Parker follows him much more quietly, sharp eyes flickering over Marcus and Gabriella and processing the situation quickly. He puts a hand on his friend’s shoulder to rein him in.

Jason turns to face him, frowning and concerned. “What is it?”

“I think we should leave,” says Parker quietly. His face hardly ever moves, even when he’s talking, and it’s very unnerving.

Jason raises an eyebrow. “Why?”

Gabriella shakes her head, eyes squeezed shut. “I have to go – take a walk or something,” she says in a rush, and hugs herself as she makes her way to the front door quickly and without looking back. The door slams and echoes, leaving uncomfortable silence in its wake.

Jason turns back to Marcus, eyes wide. “Whoa. What happened?”

“Jason,” says Parker firmly, and grabs his friend’s wrist. “We are *leaving* now.” Without a goodbye to Marcus, he tugs his still protesting friend out into the cold and shuts the door hard.

Finally, the house is still, just him and the walls. Marcus is a little more comfortable, though still not peaceful. He never is, not in this town. He’s out of place here. Grosner is a painting, and he is a wooden figurine someone has thrown on top of it, commanding him to sink into the brushstrokes.

He breathes, and breathes again.

## My Mother's Coffee

The ash from Jason's cigarette sprinkles onto the ground. He takes a drag, raises his brown eyebrows, and blows the smoke out of his mouth. "You going to Caleb's party this Saturday?" he asks. Despite his cigarette addiction, his teeth are ridiculously white.

I tap my fingers together and stare at the near-empty parking lot. "I don't know," I say.

He raises an eyebrow. "You don't know?"

"I might go," I amend. There's a little bird hopping around by the rusty green trashcan to our left. It's barely visible due to its dark coloring.

"Aw, come on, man," says Jason. "Caleb throws great parties." His wrinkled shirt creases even more when he shifts.

"The last time we went to one of Caleb's parties you ended up lighting the couch on fire," I counter dryly. The bird starts pecking at some crumbs on the ground.

"That was one time," says Jason dismissively, waving his hand. "Look, I just think you should enjoy yourself every now and then, that's all."

I don't answer. Out of the corner of my eye I see him shake his head as he stubs his cigarette out on the curb and flicks it into the trashcan, startling the bird into flight. I look ahead and stare at nothing.

Jason's torso returns to its original position as he links his fingers, elbows on his knees. We sit on the edge of the concrete sidewalk for a while, feet planted on the asphalt. I'm wondering if the owner of the convenience store is ever going to come

out and yell at us for loitering when I feel a nudge against my foot. I glance at Jason. His brown eyes are soft.

“You okay?” he asks.

I look at him for a second before turning to stare at the road that lies beyond the unconquerable stretch of parking lot before us. “Yeah.”

The cars have been blackened by night.

\*\*\*

*The room is quiet except for the sound of shutters trembling in the late evening wind. I'm sitting on the floor with my back against my bed. The room is dark; I didn't turn on the light when Monica and I came in and now I don't want to get up. She sits against the wall across from me, legs tucked to her chest, arms hugging her knees. At some point we silently agreed to take a break from homework. “Do you have gum?” she asks. I shake my head, not wanting to gather up the energy to speak. “Are you okay?” she asks, head tilted.*

*“Sure,” I say.*

*She draws her knees closer to her chest and tightens her hold on her legs.*

*“Come on. Please?”*

*I'm fairly sure my face is blank. “Please what?”*

*I'm sure she knows I'm stalling, but if she feels frustration it doesn't show in the lines of her body. “Please tell me if you're not okay,” she elaborates.*

*I shift, the wall hard against my back through my hoodie. “Why?”*

*“Because I care,” she says quietly. She's always so soft.*

*I tap my thumbs against each other and let my eyes wander around the room as though I haven't slept in it almost every night of nearly two decades.*

*"Won't your mom worry if you're not home soon?" I ask.*

*"She doesn't care," says Monica, and takes a pencil from where it was lying on top of her notebook to fiddle with it.*

*"It's a school night," I remind her.*

*Monica stares at the pencil. "She doesn't care."*

*I turn my hand over and skim the knuckles across my knee where the denim has faded and torn. "I'm going to sleep soon," I say.*

*"No you're not. You're lying on your bed staring at the ceiling for an hour, then doing homework for an hour, and then going to sleep." I wonder if I should be concerned that she knows so much about my daily routine. I don't think of anything to say, and it surprises me that it takes her so long to speak again. "What classes do you have tomorrow?" she asks finally.*

*"Geography," I say automatically. "Physics. English. Math."*

*She shifts so that she's sitting a little taller against the wall. "Advanced calculus?"*

*"Yeah," I say, and glance out the window as the autumn wind begins to pick up.*

*She's quiet for a moment, thinking. "You're in the same class as Jason, aren't you?"*

*"No."*

*She presses her pencil between the pads of two fingers and continues looking at me. "No?" she asks.*

*The big maple outside my window is starting to sway. Last year, the next-door neighbors' hickory fell during a thunderstorm and crashed through their roof. "They transferred him to another section because he wouldn't stop flirting with Katie," I say.*

*Monica drops the pencil and drums her fingers across her knee. "Have you ever had a girlfriend?" she asks softly.*

*I'm staring at the ceiling, bumpy and white. "Eighth grade."*

*"But you also took a girl to prom, didn't you?" she asks earnestly.*

*"Jason made me," I tell her. "He wanted to go on a double date."*

*She lets her head rest against the wall and links her hands together. "What was she like?" she asks softly.*

*Whenever I think of prom I remember Jason wearing a blue tux with penguin buttons, his arm around Katie. Her dress was bubblegum pink. I can't remember what color my date wore. It might have been blue. "She was okay," I say.*

*"Okay?" Monica sounds like she wants elaboration, but I don't know what to give her.*

*"Nice."*

*Monica taps her fingers together and is silent for a few seconds. "And Jason took Katie?" she asks eventually.*

*Exhaustion settles onto me like bricks. I lean back against the wall heavily as if hands are pushing my shoulders toward the floor. "Of course Jason took Katie."*

*Monica is silent. I swipe at the skin beneath my eye.*

*“You do that a lot,” she remarks. I glance at her. She smiles – a sad, faint, beautiful thing. “It’s like you’re about to cry, and you keep wiping the tears away even though they haven’t started yet.”*

*I look at the ceiling again.*

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“You should go out with Monica,” Jason tells me out of the blue.

I look at him, startled. “What?”

“You should go out with Monica,” he repeats, as though I hadn’t heard. I stare at him. He blinks, eyelashes meeting and separating. “What? She really likes you.”

I give my gaze back to the parking lot. “I know.”

“Sooo?” Jason coaxes, voice trailing upwards as he nudges my knee with his.

I lean away from him. “No.”

“Why not?” he whines. He always looks younger when he does that.

“I don’t like her like that,” I answer, wondering if I should go inside and get some coffee.

He pouts, as though my lack of a romantic life is a personal inconvenience for him. “You don’t seem to like *anyone* like that.” Frustration colors his words.

I don’t say anything.

“Why don’t you try to find someone?” he persists. “Someone who makes you feel good. The way I feel with Katie, you know?”

“I know.”

He pauses, cocking his head. His brown hair falls over the corner of one of his eyes. “I’ve never been able to figure you out, man,” he says, and suddenly I feel so tired.

“Maybe that’s not such a bad thing.”

His fingers drum across his knee. His left hand’s ring finger was broken in a bar fight two years ago and it’s still artistically crooked. “Do you have gum?” he asks.

I give him my last stick.

\*\*\*

*“Do you have gum?” I ask my mom. She doesn’t hear me. “Mom?” I ask again. She turns, black eyebrows raised. “Do you have gum?” I repeat.*

*“What do you need gum for?” she asks bemusedly, and tucks a few stray hairs behind her ear.*

*“I want white teeth,” I say, drumming my fingers across the kitchen counter and looking at her expectantly.*

*My mom sighs, but the skin around her eyes crinkles. “Eat your sandwich, Parker.”*

*Jason and I are sitting at the kitchen counter eating PB&Js and kicking our legs. Jason wipes his mouth with the back of his hand. “That sandwich was great, Mrs. Robinson!” he exclaims. “May I have another?”*

*My mom smiles and shakes her head. “Sorry, honey. They’re not too good for you. But I just made coffee, if you want.”*

*“Coffee isn’t healthy, Mom,” I protest, resting my chin in my palm. “And it’s not for kids.”*

*“Nonsense,” she says. “There’s nothing wrong with coffee.” She gets out a big mug and fills two-thirds of it with the strange liquid before handing it to a ridiculously wide-eyed Jason.*

*Jason peers down at the drink, no doubt seeing the reflection of his pink lips and pale teeth. "Wow," he breathes. My mom smiles, and I roll my eyes as Jason sits there patiently, kicking his legs as he waits for the coffee to cool.*

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Jason plunks himself down on the curb, a Styrofoam cup of what is probably cappuccino in hand. He stretches out his long legs, jeans barely coming down to his ankles, and glances at me. He offers the drink and takes a sip after I shake my head. His crooked finger taps against the container's side. "Remember when I got this?" he asks.

I glance at him. "What?"

"The finger," he elaborates, wiggling said digit as he smiles slightly. The corners of his eyes crinkle.

"Yes, I remember many times people have given you the finger." I turn back to the parking lot and see two figures walking along the roadside holding hands.

Jason punches my arm gently. "At the bar. Y'know, when I was defending you?"

"You weren't defending me," I reply, watching as the guy puts a hand on the small of the girl's back to guide her around what looks like an animal carcass. "A couple of guys were being assholes and you decided to take it personally on my behalf."

"I was looking out for you, dude."

"I can take care of myself," I reply, and wonder if it even matters.

He smiles lopsidedly. "I know you can." He puts a hand on my shoulder and I stand, shoving my hands into my pockets. He jumps up and jogs after me as I start

walking across the parking lot. “I’m just saying I care about you, dude. Sometimes I wonder if you get that. You’re hard to read when you’re busy being the stoic protagonist of your own anime or something.” I occupy myself with trying to identify the kind of animal carcass the couple avoided. Jason puts his thumbs in the front pockets of his jeans. “You’re always looking straight ahead when you walk down the hallways,” he continues. “You stare at most people when they try to talk to you. And I know you’re a good student and everything, but you never speak in class. You hardly acknowledge that other people exist.” He pauses. “But you like me, don’t you?” I glance at him to see that his large brown eyes mirror the question’s sincerity. “Otherwise you wouldn’t tolerate my presence.”

“I’m trying to walk away from you,” I say. “Does it look like I want to tolerate your presence?”

He grins. “No. But you will anyway, because we’re besties.”

“Sorry to break it to you, but I’m not going to be ‘besties’ with someone who actually uses the word *besties*.” I walk faster; the wind starts cutting through my jacket and shirt.

“Aw, come on,” he says, grinning with his white teeth. He matches my pace easily. “You totally love me.”

“Stop breathing on me.”

“Parker!” Jason whines, and frees his hands so he can flail while he pouts. “Say you love me!”

I look into the blackness and remember my mother’s coffee, the way she carried it and the way she placed it in front of me carefully when I decided I was old enough to drink it. It was the first thing I saw when I came home from school the

day she left: a cup of coffee sitting on the kitchen counter, half empty with bright lipstick on the rim. That was it. She didn't even leave a note to say she loved me.

I exhale so quietly I'm sure Jason doesn't hear it. "I love you, Jason."

His grin widens. "Of course you do." He sticks his hands in his pockets and strolls along beside me without a care. At that moment, though they never looked anything alike, he resembles my mother, who knew how to laugh and knew how to love and was actually a pretty good parent before she left.

"Did you forget your coffee back there?" I ask.

He glances over his shoulder briefly before turning back to me with his lips curved. "Nah," he says. "I don't want it anymore."

"You paid for that, Jason," I remind him.

He shrugs. "It wasn't very good anyway," he says, and gives me a smile that lights up his eyes.

## The Words She Once Wrote

Monica's key doesn't work the first time she shoves it into the lock. She doesn't want to push too hard. She's broken keys that way. It takes a few twists to get the door unstuck – it's getting so cold – but eventually it relents.

The house is cool and dim when she enters, probably to protect the family portraits hanging on the living room walls. "Mom?" she calls out, expecting no answer and receiving none. She drops her keys into the bowl by the door and shifts her backpack across her shoulders to try to stop her muscles from aching. She has so many textbooks and so many dozens of pages to read.

She lives on the second floor. It takes her forever to climb stairs these days, but there's nothing to be done about that. When she finally gets to her room she drops her backpack on her bed, plunks herself down in her chair, and puts her forehead on her desk. It's several minutes before she lifts it up again.

Her fingers are trembling when she opens her desk drawer, pulling out the faded piece of paper she's had since she was eight. It's slightly torn by now, and very creased. It's just a little project she did for school when the teacher made them all write letters to their future selves. She mouths the words as she reads them once again.

*Dear Monica,*

*I'm eight and a half right now, but you're going to be older when you read this. You're going to be a doctor and fall in love with a pretty boy. It will take a lot of work, but you can do it! I know you can.*

*Sleep well, Monica.*

*Love,*

*You*

She doesn't know why she still has it. She doesn't know why she still reads it. She remembers being so irritated with that project, scribbling the letter down right before bed the day before it was due and shoving it in her backpack. She had the energy to be impatient back then.

She heaves herself up with the help of her two hands planted on the edge of the desk and wanders over to the mirror so she can stare at her curling hair and big eyes. Her skin is flaking a little on her forehead, but her nose is straight as ever and her eyelashes are long and her cheeks are flushed. She's pretty except for the hair growing across her armpits and legs, hair she can't shave because her mom took her razor away. She's a pretty girl. Pretty girls aren't supposed to think much.

She thinks so much. Every decision she makes is like a block of lead in her brain, weighing her down. When to sleep, what to eat, who to talk to, how to dress, where to move. And then there's the homework – stacks and stacks of it, breaking her back as she walks home from school. It presses on her until she decides what reading to do first, figures out which teacher to please the most, and wonders whether she'd be able to breathe again if she didn't have it.

But it's pretty tough for a high schooler anyway, waking up every morning and trying to decide whether this is the day she's going to die.

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She feels like she's going to throw up when she turns the last corner of her morning route and faces the sight of her school. It's not an uncommon feeling, and it rarely leads to anything, but she keeps two paper bags and a package of Pepto-Bismol inside her backpack just in case.

The school is made of red brick and it was rebuilt a few years ago after a student burnt part of it down in the midst of finals. It has been unimaginatively titled Grosner High School after the town and its founder, and a large wooden plaque hangs above the main entrance, exhibiting the name as though its students should be proud.

First period is English: Raskolnikov and his angst. Good. She leans her backpack against the locker next to hers as she extracts *Crime and Punishment* and then slams the door shut with more force than is necessary. The hallway is cold, it's early, and almost no one has arrived yet.

When she gets to the classroom she sees one seated figure leaning over a desk at the front of the room. Parker. She approaches slowly and slides into a chair a few seats down from him. He glances at her. "Hi," she says, and smiles.

"Hello," he says. He's got his pad out and is taking notes that aren't due until next class.

Her chest is pounding at too fast a rate. She's thinking of what else she could say when she hears laughing from outside the classroom. When she turns she sees, as she expected, Katie and Jason, holding hands like they do and grinning. It makes her smile. "Okay, I *have* to go now," Katie says, and moves to pull away.

Jason makes a face but lets go nonetheless. "All right, *fine*," he sighs, and then straightens, blowing a kiss. "Love ya, babe!" When he finally turns around, presumably after Katie's left his line of sight, his grin is big. He lopes into the classroom and throws himself down next to Monica with a pleased expression.

"Hello, Monica!" he says, but before she can respond he's taken a sheet of paper out

of his backpack, crumpled it up, and thrown it at Parker's head. "Dude," he says. "What's up?"

"Don't throw things at me," says Parker in a monotone, and continues to take notes on Raskolnikov's anguish.

Jason makes a face. "You are so unpleasant in the mornings." Suddenly, with that energetic air particular to him, he lights up and starts tapping on his desk. "Oh, oh!" he says. "Guess what? I might have a job for next year!"

This makes Parker glance at him. "Yeah?"

"Mm-hmm. I have an interview next Tuesday." Parker doesn't say anything, and Jason turns back to Monica, eyes twinkling. "He's proud of me, even if he won't admit it," he confides, and turns back to Parker. "So!" he exclaims. "What are you going to do next year?"

Parker doesn't look up as he says, "I think I'm going to join the army."

Monica feels more than sees Jason jerk, a full-bodied thing that shifts him until he's sitting on the edge of his chair. "You *what?*" he screeches.

Parker just glances at him with that strange, unliving look of his. "The army," he repeats slowly, as if Jason is dim. When Jason only stares at him with wide eyes, he continues, "You know, uniforms? Guns? Camouflage? I'll get away, breathe some air, write some letters."

"You can't – you can't *leave*," Jason splutters. Monica is wondering if she should exit the situation somehow, never mind that she's waiting for class to begin, when Jason hurtles out of his chair, plunks himself down in the chair next to Parker's, and leans over so that he's invading his friend's space. "I mean – what the

hell, man? Since when did you think it was okay to make these kinds of big-ass decisions without even telling me?”

“I don’t have to tell you everything,” says Parker, gazing down at where he’s been writing in his notebook. His pen moves slowly and his knuckles are scuffed.

“Parker,” says Jason. “Parker. Listen to me, man.” He puts a hand on his friend’s desk. “You can’t go away. You just can’t. I mean – you don’t know anyone in the army. You don’t know what it’s like!”

“You’re not being very supportive,” says Parker dryly. Out of nowhere, he glances at Monica, who feels her lungs constricting. His eyes are beautiful, and very brown.

“Monica,” says Jason, and her eyes snap to him. “Monica,” he entreats, leaning toward her. “You think he should stay, right? Come on, Monica. You have to convince him. What do you think about this whole thing?”

*It won’t work, is what she thinks. You can’t leave. No one ever leaves this town except in a coffin.*

Monica smiles at Jason, though she kind of feels like she’s going to throw up again. “Although I don’t like friends going away,” she says delicately, “I think Parker probably knows what’s best for him.”

Jason just gapes at her, and she thinks she’d be offended, if she had the energy. What did he expect her to do? Fall at Parker’s feet and beg him not to leave?

Abruptly, as though deeming her useless to his cause, Jason turns back to Parker, who has started doodling, and gives him his full attention. “Listen,” he says. “Don’t leave. We *need* you here, man.”

“You never know when to let it go, do you?” is all Parker says. He swipes at the skin under one of his eyes and when Monica glances down at his paper she can see that he’s been drawing ivy.

Jason is staring at him, the shock in his face morphed into something more distressed. “Parker,” he says softly, and Monica can see that his eyes are afraid. “What am I supposed to do without you?”

“You’re supposed to carry on,” says Parker lightly, and continues drawing so that black ink creeps across the page in front of him.

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Monica’s mom has hidden her scissors. She has nothing to cut her hair with. It’s spilling into her eyes and she can’t see her homework.

She only realizes she’s been staring down at the blank page in front of her for twenty minutes without moving when the doorbell rings. She jerks, checks the clock, and glances at her closed door. The possibility of not answering the shrill ring of the bell that is once again sounding throughout the house occurs to her, but, deciding the persistence would aggravate her too much, she forces herself to rise and exit her room, traveling slowly down the stairs with a death grip on the banister.

It takes several moments of mustering up energy to open the door and when she does she’s greeted with the sight of Gabriella on her doorstep, lacking a jacket, hunched up against the wind, bare brown shoulders littered with gooseflesh. Her shirt is falling down, her mascara is smudged, and her hair is tangled. Her eyes look slightly wild.

It takes Monica several moments before she realizes Gabriella isn't going to say anything. "Would you like to come in?" she offers dutifully, and Gabriella moves past her to enter the house. Her perfume is vanilla today.

When Monica has closed the door and turned around she sees that Gabriella has not gotten far. Instead, she's just standing in the middle of the hallway awkwardly, hands twisted together, shaking. Her eyes are huge.

"What's wrong?" asks Monica.

"I'm pregnant," she whispers, and good Lord, Monica so did not sign on for this.

After a sufficiently uncomfortable period of silence, Monica finally blinks. "You're *pregnant*?" she echoes.

"Yes," Gabriella hisses. "Yes, okay? I screwed the husband of the head of the PTA and now I'm knocked up and he won't help, not even after I threatened to tell his wife. I mean – *Jesus*, Monica. What do I do?"

Monica takes a deep breath to stop herself from stuttering. "Do you have any money for an abortion?" she asks slowly.

"Maybe – I'm not sure – but that's not the point. I don't know if I can do it without my dad finding out. It's such a small town. And he'll *kill* me if he finds out," she hisses, and sinks down into a chair near the dining table. Monica follows her lead. "You know that girl who used to go to school with us?" Gabriella continues, staring at Monica. "Marie? Her dad cut her up so bad, called her a whore, and now she's nowhere to be seen. And I don't even think she got pregnant – I think he just assumed she was having sex. And I don't want to end up like that, Monica, I *can't*." She's started to shake, a tear slipping down her cheek and smudging her eyeliner.

Monica puts a hand over hers. “But – I don’t even know if I want to kill it,” Gabriella says. “The baby, I mean. It’s just a kid, you know? How can I do that? How do I decide whether I want to kill it? How do I stop my dad from killing *me*?”

Monica stares at her, her mind blank like a computer malfunctioning. *Say something*, she tells herself. *Say something*. She blinks, and all she can think of is Parker doodling, essays to be written, and nine-year-old letters. Any way she slices it, Gabriella is going to have to build her own coffin, isn’t she?

Monica looks down at their hands on the table, creased with lines. “Tell your dad,” she says. “That’s all you can do right now.”

Gabriella is crying for real by now, tears hugging the curves of her lips and dripping onto her neck. “He’ll kill me,” she whispers.

“If you don’t tell him you’ll be killing yourself,” says Monica, and that’s the only advice she knows how to give.

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She dreams of ink. Someone is writing her letters, but she can’t see the figure’s face. Parker dies, Gabriella weeps. Monica is standing in the shower. She’s standing in her room. Her wrists are red again, her wooden floor is stained. Her mom is barging in, yelling, yelling, *no one can ever find out what Monica tried to do to herself*.

She only realizes she’s fallen asleep at her desk when a sharp series of knocks against her bedroom door causes her to jolt upright, a page of messy notes clinging to her wet lips. She peels it off disconcertedly and turns to see her mother hovering in the doorway, frowning. She’s scraped her black hair into a severe bun, whereas Monica’s is spilling all across her shoulders and back.

“Monica,” she says, and pauses as she surveys the room with her never-blinking gaze. Monica just looks down at her fingernails and picks at the skin around them. She doesn’t *think* the state of her room is worth criticizing, though of course the floor is still discolored.

When she looks back up her mother is gazing at her, arms folded across her chest as she leans against the doorway. “How’s your homework coming, hon?” she asks. Monica looks down to where the half-filled page of barely legible notes stares up at her accusingly. She doesn’t remember which textbook she had been reading. Something about Charlemagne?

She turns back to her mom. “Good,” she says. “My history project is progressing. In fact, it – it’s almost done. I think I’m going to turn in for the night.”

Her mother nods. “Good.” Her keen eyes turn toward the room again, searching, searching. What is she looking for? Sharp objects? Finally, her gaze turns back to her daughter and she smiles – nothing happy, nothing sad, nothing there. She nods again. “All right. Sleep well, Monica.” She turns and exits the room, closing the door quietly behind her.

Sleep well, Monica.

## Kids

Two boys have made their way into the basement, setting their schoolwork down next to a big table by the couches and the TV. Parker is sitting on the floor with his elbows on the table, peering down at his work. Jason is in the other room, getting drinks out of the mini-fridge.

Parker has been to the barber. His black hair now sits close to his head and there's nothing to hide his dark eyes. "How did your interview go?" he asks without looking up as Jason enters the room holding two Cokes. His pencil is tapping against his graph paper, each moment of contact making a loud *thwack*.

Jason plunks the Cokes down and flops into a pretzel-style seated position on the floor. "I didn't go," he announces, and heaves his backpack onto the table, dumping its contents out unceremoniously.

Parker makes a noise of disapproval and pulls his schoolwork away from the sudden flurry of pencil shavings and notebooks. "Why not? Did you find another position somewhere?"

"Nah, I think I'm going to join the army after graduation," Jason says casually, but he's looking at his friend out of the corner of his eye as he waits for a reaction.

Parker's expression does not speak of surprise, though in all fairness it rarely speaks of anything. The only sign that he considers Jason's sentence to be unusual at all is that for once he's giving Jason his full attention, his hard brown eyes fixed on his friend's face. Jason finds that it is rather an unpleasant experience. "What are you talking about?" Parker asks finally, though it sounds more like a statement than a question.

“Didn’t you know that if you went off to the army I would go with you?” Jason asks, tilting his head with a small curve to his mouth.

Parker just stares at him, no trace of positive emotion showing through his expression, and it kills Jason’s smile. Two friends become two boys staring at each other in the coldness of a basement. Eventually, Parker says, “No, Jason. That was not a thing that I knew.”

“You’re unhappy,” says Jason, who has deflated, softly. With his brown hair falling across his forehead he looks nothing like a soldier.

Parker drums his fingertips across the table, hard nails clacking when they meet the wood. He’s surrounded by a swarm of papers, Jason’s notes and cheat sheets spilling over onto his side of the table. “You don’t really want to go to the army,” he says. “It wouldn’t suit you at all.”

Jason frowns. “What are you talking about? I can adapt. Don’t pigeonhole me.” Parker has started solving an equation and doesn’t answer him. Jason takes his pencil away and blinks unrepentantly when Parker glares at him. “Pay attention to me,” he says. “I am talking about something serious, here.”

“No one needs to pay you more attention, Jason,” says Parker, and swipes for his pencil.

Jason raises his hand to keep the pencil out of reach. “Stop *deflecting!*” He pockets the pencil and glares. “You say you’re going to the army. As long as you’re going, I’m going. Because we’re friends. So. Are you going to mope?”

“I never mope,” says Parker automatically.

“Good,” says Jason, and opens his Coke. “Then you’ll help me with calculus instead of sulking. What’s the deal with determinants, again?”

Parker opens the textbook with a thud and points to a header, starting to explain the principles of the lesson. Jason glances at him every so often to try to determine if he's really okay, and Parker just carries on.

Two teenaged boys sit in a dark (and slightly damp) basement in a sturdy little house in a lonely little town, slowly solving for the value of  $x$ .

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A boy and a girl sit at their kitchen table and wait.

“Okay,” says the girl finally, and nods. Her right hand is clenched into a tight fist and the other one trembles. “Okay. Thank you. I’ll be there next week.” She drops the phone.

Marcus looks at his sister. “You got the appointment?”

Gabriella nods without looking at him, her eyes glassy. “Next Tuesday at four o’clock,” she says, her bottom lip trembling.

Marcus takes the phone from her and places it in its holder. “Okay,” he says. “Okay. So, they’ll be able to tell you more about – you know.” Gabriella doesn’t answer him. “I’m guessing you didn’t tell Dad yet?” he asks.

She shakes her head. “Obviously not. I’m still alive, aren’t I?”

“He could be supportive,” Marcus counters weakly.

She doesn’t deign to grace that with an answer, just sniffs and wipes the back of her hand across her nose. There’s lint clinging to the elbow of her sweater. He knows he should talk to her, ask her about her feelings, offer brotherly support, but he’s not sure he wouldn’t manage to make the situation worse. Gabriella looks up at him through her eyelashes. He thinks she’s probably going to kill it, going to kill the

baby, and then maybe she'll be able to make a kid of herself again, if that's possible in such a town.

Gabriella sighs. "I'm sorry I called you all the way down here just for this, Markie," she says, and Marcus thinks she's probably just regretting it because he's been absolutely no help whatsoever.

"Don't worry about it," he says, hand hovering above hers before awkwardly giving it a few pats. "That's what brothers are for." He thinks that's what brothers are for, anyway.

Gabriella is wiping at the corner of her eye with short motions, the movements almost natural, trying to pretend she isn't crying. "Are you all packed?" she asks, voice steady.

Truly, he hasn't unpacked since he arrived a few days ago. He nods. "Yes. I checked under the bed."

"You left your toothbrush last time."

"Yeah."

They lapse into self-conscious silence, and at last Gabriella sighs. "Come on, Markie," she says. "I'll drive you to the airport."

The boy and the girl get into a car and drive away from there.

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Two girls sit in a bedroom and wait for a phone call. Across the street, a convenience store boasts, "ICE COFFEE BEER." The *C* of *ICE* has burned out, but the rest of the letters flicker in and out of consciousness, glaring red when the lights work and sinking into blackness when they don't.

“Gabriella said she’d call right after she dropped her brother off at the airport, right?” Cassie asks when the silence has become unbearable. She’s never had this much trouble conversing with someone before.

Monica’s dark hair has fallen all across her shoulders and she reaches up to pin it behind her head. When Cassie speaks she glances up and nods. Pages and pages of notes mask the floor in front of her, offering relentless streams of words. “Sometimes traffic can be bad on the highway,” she offers, staring down at a page that’s covered in green scribbles.

They don’t know each other well, these two girls. One has lived here all her life, and the other has lived everywhere all her life. They have next to nothing in common, right down to the color of their eyes and the styles of their handwriting.

Monica clears her throat. “You have a brother, right?” There’s something in her tone, maybe jealousy or longing, but it’s not clear.

“Yes.” She doesn’t mention that she has two. “Do you have any siblings?”

“No.”

“Oh.”

Monica looks at her feet, curling her fingers around the bare toes. “Is he going to be all right, your brother?” she asks. *Now that your dad’s dead*, Cassie knows she means.

“I don’t know,” she says honestly. He’s only a kid, and now legally an orphan. She’s not eighteen yet. “He’s a good kid, so I hope so.” Monica doesn’t answer her, so she blabbers on. “But he’s resilient. I think he gets that from our mom. It’s how she used to be.” She probably shouldn’t be saying this, but Monica’s just staring at the ground, so Cassie goes on, a hollow feeling opening up in her chest that she has,

until now, refused to harbor since she left the hospital with Mark. “That’s the way good moms – good parents – have to be. To teach their kids to always be able to pick out the things that make life worth living, you know?” She swears she has never been this sentimental in her life, but right now, to her dismay, she feels that her eyes are stinging.

“I’ll be right back,” mutters Monica abruptly, and stands so quickly the papers around her flutter and turn over themselves. She exits the room swiftly and almost soundlessly, leaving Cassie to stare at the open bedroom door.

Cassie blinks, stares, and finally looks back down at her homework to realize she was studying the World War I trenches. Blood, guts, and grenades. Cassie breathes, and breathes again.

One girl sits alone, soaked in silence, and the lights of the convenience store outside sputter red.

## Gathering Red

My mom likes to say the people here are unique. She's right. We're not like the teenagers I pretend I can see from my window. Every so often I stare out of my room and envision my old school's football field. I make believe I see the people – teenagers like us (except not really like us) who loiter outside during lunch. Sometimes I can almost hear them laughing and shouting. When they go inside they'll learn important things like how to negotiate at diplomatic conferences and how to distinguish Pepsi from Coke in the cafeteria. Us, we learn different things. Unique.

They transferred me here because they thought I was going to kill myself. This is an important issue for educators, because if a student commits suicide it stays in the school's records forever. And if parents discover a school isn't able to stop a student from killing herself, they send their children elsewhere to study the Enlightenment and advanced calculus.

Five times a week they put Marie and Benjamin and a few other teenage dependents and me in a room for group so we can learn how to "cope with things." This doesn't make sense to me, because I can cope just fine. It's not like I'm depressed or anything. The exception to my coping abilities is the food they serve at lunch, but I'm fairly sure there's no feasible way for anybody to cope with that. If it weren't for Benjamin, I'd probably spend half my mealtimes wondering whose idea it was to serve prison food to children. As it is, I spend them listening to his soft, calming voice. He talks about violins and trees, and that's my version of coping.

Benjamin is seventeen. He was transferred here from a school in New York City, where he once got beat up behind a Dairy Queen for looking an older boy in the

eye. I met him my first day here when I was in group, where they ask us how we're feeling as we sit in a circle like my aunt said she did at those Alcoholics Anonymous meetings she used to go to. When I came into the room that first day I saw Benjamin sitting quietly in his plastic chair. When I sat next to him he smiled at me, and that's how I knew we were going to be friends.

We never run out of things to talk about. That's just the way it works in some friendships. As I mentioned, we spend a lot of time conversing in the cafeteria. Even though its beverages are limited to water and watery milk, it can be interesting. During lunch we mingle with other dependents, some of whom I think might have been inmates once. There's a boy who always tries to shove his penis in front of you no matter how politely you ask him to stop. He doesn't do anything else, though. I guess he's okay.

Some people won't talk to me. In the room next to mine, for example, there's a little lump of a person who never makes a sound. Once in the cafeteria I offered to share my cheese with her, but she shrank away. I asked her if she was all right, but she didn't say anything. Her skin was pale, almost white, and she was motionless except for her hands moving over each other again and again. I think she's here for suffering through alcohol poisoning too many times. I leave her alone.

Last week a curly-haired boy named Ralph who sits across from Benjamin and Marie and me said he felt like a nauseous quagmire of persecuted anguish. Jared, who sits next to him, said he felt like jacking off. I hear him sometimes, when he does that. His room isn't too far from mine. *Creak-y, creak-y, creak-y.*

Marie doesn't masturbate. I know this because she told me, and I believe her because she's my friend. She holds my hand nervously when we go to group, even

though we're not supposed to touch each other, and she doesn't tell adults the truth. She doesn't like thinking about what happened to her because then her chest will tighten and white will flood into her vision. Sometimes she'll claw at her eyes like she's going crazy. She told our group leaders her brother raped her, but that's not the truth. I don't think they believe her anyway, because her mom, who transferred her here, probably told them what really happened.

Marie has a scar on her arm. She told me how she got it when we were playing cards in the common room. She said one day before she came here her dad went to the liquor store, bought a bottle of vodka, and returned home. When he finished the bottle he hit it against their kitchen table and it shattered. He remembered he had four dollar bills in his pocket, so he put them on the table and grabbed a ragged shard from the floor. Then he carved a 4 into the side of Marie's arm and told her that was how much she was worth. Four dollars.

Marie won't tell the group this story, but they asked me to tell mine during the first session and I figured I might as well. I was doing well at my high school, but one day the faculty got a call from my mom, who informed them that I had tried to commit suicide. As a consequence, they transferred me here to be with unique people. But they're wrong. I wasn't trying to kill myself when my mom found me that day. I was talking to Uncle Calister. When I lived at home Uncle Calister came to see me every Tuesday at four o'clock. I would kneel under a tree's shade, facing its trunk, and wait for him. One day when he was visiting my mom came outside. I turned around when I heard her and saw her eyes grow wide and scared. I didn't mean to frighten her, of course. I only did what Uncle Calister wanted, because

otherwise he wouldn't stay. It wasn't really so terrible. When my wrists were covered in red I didn't have to see the veiny skin stretched across my scraggy bones.

My mom pulled me into the house; she said I appeared lifeless. I wasn't lifeless. I was talking to Uncle Calister. I think it's strange she couldn't see him. He's her brother and he used to make her happy because my father – when he was alive – couldn't. I liked talking to my uncle. I don't know why he hasn't visited me here.

My supervisors thought the red might kill me, but it's the white they should be worried about. I'm not positive it will *kill* me, per se, but it's definitely strangling. The walls and the nurses' hair and the orderlies' uniforms are white and the whiteness tightens around me and around us.

The whiteness smells like disinfectant and chemicals, and sometimes it sounds like clean knives and beeping machines. It's too sterile for me, too unlike the dirt I used to kneel in while I waited for my uncle. It feels like someone came in here one day and drained all the color away into their own skin, leaving us with these blank walls and ceilings and floors. I tried drawing on the walls with a red crayon once, like a peace offering, but the nurses stopped me before I could start decorating the *B* of Benjamin's name. That made me even more scared, because if the white is supposed to protect us, why wouldn't it accept my drawings? Why did the people in white stop me from trying to save them? I was trying to save us all.

Benjamin doesn't like the white because it reminds him of his father's hair. He told me his father is pale and that he walked around like a zombie with his flesh sagging from his bones. Benjamin's surprised his dad could punch so hard when he looked so frail. He was surprised the bruises on his skin could grow so dark. The

bruises were purple and blue, but the white makes him more anxious than purple and blue ever could. Sometimes he'll flinch if the nurses come too close.

Benjamin says they don't see what we see. The nurses, that is. He says they see cases instead of people. They look at me with trepidation sometimes, like they can see through my skin to my bones. Sometimes they look like they can feel the red rushing inside me the way people smell colors when they're high. Benjamin has smelled colors before, I think. I've never taken drugs, but I've seen the little scars on his arms. They're not like Marie's scar. They're parallel scratches, thin lines that look like they'll jump off his skin if he so much as walks too fast. He's so frail. I think he's here because of the toxins he was addicted to injecting into himself. He doesn't like to think about it. Instead, he talks about violins and trees and how he appreciates that the cafeteria serves pizza sometimes. He's good at finding the little positives in life. Still, the white makes him uneasy.

I like talking about Benjamin. He doesn't speak to anyone but me, which is flattering. The group leaders don't talk to him and they never look at him. Marie says she can't see him either, which I think is kind of rude of her. He told me he thinks she's really pretty. They share the same black, curly hair, the same bone structure, and the same pale, fragile skin. They could be siblings. He told me he thinks she's gorgeous, and she doesn't even bother to try and see him. It's the least she could do.

The first time Benjamin spoke to me was the first time I was in individual therapy. The nurses make me go so I won't think of trying to produce the red again. It's all very silly, of course, because Uncle Calister hasn't visited me here, and if he doesn't visit I don't need the red. I couldn't see Benjamin when I was sitting there

with my psychologist, but I could hear his voice, charming and clear. He told me my therapist made him nervous. He gets a weird vibe from her. Now he talks to me when I'm in my room and not during therapy, so I guess he's found a way around his uneasiness. This makes me glad, because I like it when he's comfortable. He makes me comfortable too. He told me he started speaking to me because the therapist had asked about my mother. He knew I didn't want to talk about her because if I do I'll picture the way she always looks so sad when she sees me. It makes me feel heavy and dull. She comes to visit when she can, but she doesn't hear Benjamin and she can't see him. She's a nervous woman with frightened eyes and a lovely countenance, and I think she sees what she wants to see, like the nurses.

The nurses don't hear Benjamin either. I feel bad for all of them, because he has the kind of voice that makes you want to stay quiet and listen for hours. This is, in fact, what I do on a daily basis. Sometimes Marie joins us. We form a little triangle and she watches me steadily as I take in Benjamin's words, occasionally speaking myself. It's on a Wednesday that we're sitting at a table and she tells me she can see the tips of his curly black hair. Filled with sudden animation, I tell her to sit on the ground with Benjamin and me so she can look at him more closely. "What else do you see?" I ask her excitedly.

She blinks. "A floating head," she replies calmly. She looks like she's about to engage in meditation, her legs crossed, her hands placed gently on her knees.

"That's weird," I remark.

"So are we," she points out, and tucks a strand of curly hair behind her ear.

Her eyes are peaceful and out of focus.

I think about this, and give a little hum. “Point taken.” Marie gazes at Benjamin’s vicinity for a few moments. “What do you see?” I ask again.

She tilts her head to the side and squints. “Does he have scars on his arm?” she asks.

I scratch at my wrist. “I told you he does.”

She shifts on the ground and holds her ankles with her hands. “Just checking.”

“Why?” I ask. “Can you see them?”

She glances at me. “Not yet.” Benjamin also glances at me, and then back at her. He looks worried, and his hair is flopping into one eye.

Thinking she might be able to see him better if he speaks, I turn to him. “Benjamin. Say something.” He only shakes his head.

Marie frowns. “Why won’t he talk?” she asks.

I know why. Benjamin doesn’t feel completely comfortable around Marie. She’s always saying different things happened to her because she wants to see how her audience reacts and which story gets the strongest response. One day she was raped by a teacher, the next she’s a Katrina victim, the next she lost her family to a fire. This makes Benjamin wary. He can’t trust people when they don’t tell the truth, even if they’re not lying to him specifically.

I don’t want to tell Marie this, so I remain silent. “I can see his neck,” she says suddenly, straightening. Her eyes are no longer distant, but vividly green. “It’s bloody.”

I frown. “No it’s not.”

“Yes it is,” she replies matter-of-factly, gazing at me.

Benjamin looks at me. “He was my friend first, Marie,” I say. “I know what his neck looks like.” She doesn’t say anything. “Maybe you’re projecting,” I offer.

She looks at me and blinks, tilting her head. “Projecting?” she repeats.

“You know,” I say. “Seeing what you want to see.”

“Why would I want to see a bloody neck?” she asks, mystified. Her head is still tilted and she’s motionless as a statue.

I shrug. “You may not *want* to see it. But your dad made the same color appear on your arm, so maybe you’re seeing that on other people because you want to know that someone else went through what you did.”

“Can we stop talking about colors now?” Benjamin pleads, wringing his hands.

“Benjamin wants to stop talking about colors,” I repeat dutifully.

“I know,” says Marie. “I heard.” She starts scratching at her eyes, blunt nails digging into flesh.

I reach over and take her hands. “You shouldn’t do that,” I scold. I’m supposed to call the orderlies instead of touching her.

She grasps my hands. “I can’t help it,” she says. Her eyes are starting to look wild.

I hear an orderly’s footsteps clicking against the floor disquietingly for a few seconds before he arrives near us, but I don’t drop Marie’s hands. “What are you doing on the floor?” he asks.

I take my focus off of Marie and gaze up at him. “We’re contemplating,” I say.

“Contemplating what?” he asks, sounding like he’d rather be anywhere else. He’s got a long scratch on the left side of his face.

I shrug. "Important matters."

"Danielle," says Benjamin softly. "Maybe we should just do what he wants."

I turn to him. "What does he want?"

"For us to sit on chairs," Marie answers mechanically. She draws her hands back. "And probably for you to stop touching me."

"You wanted me to touch you," I protest. She's started to shake.

"No one should be touching anyone," says the orderly. "Now can you please stop sitting on the floor? It's not safe."

"Safe?" I inquire.

"Clean," he amends after a moment, rubbing at the dark circle under one of his eyes.

I blink at him. "Why aren't the floors of a hospital clean?" I ask, perplexed.

"We're not in a hospital," Marie responds automatically, hunched over herself.

"Yes we are," I say.

"No we're *not*." She starts scratching at her eyes, harder than before.

"Hey, hey," says the orderly. "None of that, now." He crouches and reaches out.

"No, no!" Her voice breaks as she struggles to get away, clutching the 4 on her arm so tightly her fingers go white.

"Please calm down," says the orderly, sounding strangled as he tries to keep her under control.

"Don't touch me! Get away!" She starts crying, big clear gobs tumbling down her cheeks and dripping across her neck.

Benjamin reaches out to her. "Don't," I say. He withdraws his hand.

“If you don’t calm down, I’m going to have to take you away,” the orderly warns. Marie doesn’t stop crying. Her cheeks are burning, red like a fire.

“Marie – ” I try.

The orderly pulls her to her feet. She fights, but her body is weak and it’s easy for him to drag her away. Benjamin crawls over to me and leans into my shoulder, ducking his head down.

There are only a few moments of silence before a nurse approaches and puts a gentle hand on my arm, her eyes big. Benjamin looks up. “Come on, sweetheart,” she coaxes softly. “Let’s get you back to your room.” I let her lead me away.

After that incident I sit on my bed, the white sheets crinkling softly when I shift. Benjamin talks, eyes wide, lips red. It’s good for me to hear his voice, smooth and full of color. He talks about violins and trees and I think I’m going to marry him someday, if they ever let us out of here.

## Conclusion

Any aspiring author, or writer looking to improve her skills, who peruses guides to writing will inevitably come across the age-old adage “write what you know.” At first glance, this seems quite sensible. One would expect, after all, that a student raised in France would be more likely to garner positive feedback from writing a story criticizing Paris’ secondary education system than a narrative describing the political climate of South Africa. However, this saying is not a rule. If it were, I would be concerned indeed that there are so many detailed novels about murderers, and intrigued by the books that feature non-human and magical characters. Gone would be adults writing about teens of a younger generation, fantasy novels, a large chunk of young adult fiction, and almost all of Shakespeare. Gone would be many classics: *Alice in Wonderland*, *The Hobbit*, *The Metamorphosis*, and *Watership Down*. Most importantly, adherence to this advice would lead to an enormous collapse in humans’ attempts to understand each other.

I admire the idea that personal experience does not confine a narrative. When an author writes about characters the likes of whom she has not encountered in real life, she realizes that her ability to understand them nonetheless means that no feeling a human has ever had is unique. In essence, a story has the potential to comfort anyone who reads it with the fact that no human experience is one that someone must suffer through alone. Accordingly, I have chosen to write about a place I am unfamiliar with. This collection of six stories describes some of the events that take place in Grosner, a low-income small town in the United States, its name a nod to the more affluent Grosvenor Square in London. I never lived in a small town in my life; rather, from birth until the age of eighteen, I spent my time in

Washington, D.C. and the capitals of four European countries. Writing these pieces is my way of attempting to explain that the most important human experiences – particularly the isolation that is the primary reinforcer and sometimes cause of mental suffering – are exactly human because they are not confined by place, personality, or situation.

To give freedom to the literary expression of situation and place, I use a narrative style that William Faulkner must take posthumous credit for influencing. Many of his short stories and novels discuss the lives of several inhabitants of the fictional Yoknapatawpha County, and his dedication to exploring different perspectives of the same events interests me. *The Sound and the Fury*, which throws traditional novel writing to the wind and describes the Compson family's struggles through many points of views, has affected me particularly. Why, I thought after reading this book, should a composition use only one set of eyes? Understanding a situation means understanding the people who endure it, and every character understands only a minority of what every other character experiences. This desire to examine perspectives of characters who are partially privy to the same events is what made me decide to write a collection of interwoven pieces instead of six separate ones.

However, although every person reacts to a situation differently and suffers from distinct personal struggles, there are, as I have mentioned, certain commonalities among humans, including mechanisms we use to cope with stress. These strategies include avoidance, self-alienation, and silence. Distress, in literature, often appears not in what characters orally convey, but in what they withhold when they cannot speak their minds because they must adhere to social

norms (like Monica) or because they lack the skills that will allow healthy social connections (like Marcus). I have tried to show in these stories the deleterious nature of continued silence. It is what supports Marcus' alienation, maintains Monica's depression, and disallows Parker the self-disclosure that could mitigate his anhedonia. Silence is a defense, a survival technique, sometimes necessary but usually maladaptive in the modern age. It is the primary cause of isolation and a reinforcer of negative affect and depression; in other words, suffering is a side effect of silence, and vice versa. That we live in a world that sometimes fosters such silence because it wishes to shy away from discomfort is undeniable. To show in my stories that a lack of communication can have devastating consequences is my way of encouraging the kinds of interactions that many of Grosner's inhabitants, for varied and complex reasons, do not partake in.

I have, at the same time, a tremendous love of dialogue. Speech, too, can be a defense – a distancing mechanism. The fact that people can talk without speaking (as Marcus does) and hear without listening (as Monica's mother does) is a tale as old as time. Oscar Wilde has been a guide for my composition of conversation particularly; the cleverness of *The Importance of Being Earnest* has long been something I wanted to mimic in the banter of my characters, complete with a sharpness that can be toxic (the likes of which characters like Parker and Cassie use when they are annoyed – or scared). But even before I became acquainted with the sometimes wounding tête-à-têtes of Jack Worthing and Algernon Moncrieff I was familiar with the vivacious speech of Elizabeth Bennet, which leads me to give credit to the last of my influences: Jane Austen.

Austen, now both adored and patronized, provided a witty social critique of the Regency era that was just subtle enough to allow for the publication of her novels. The liveliness of her dialogue and acuity of her prose have influenced thousands of people, and they instilled in me the desire to write characters who, like Elizabeth Bennet and Marianne Dashwood, understand that words are powerful devices that can both wound and heal. But many see Austen as silly.<sup>1</sup> She is a case of an author who wrote about what she knew: dancing and balls and gossip. Her novels tie themselves up with bows and present themselves as appealing, if somewhat lacking, presents, always ending with a desired proposal of marriage and the expectation that said marriage will be happy. Societal norms limited what she could touch upon. But, had she lived today, she would have applied the insightfulness that her genius made possible in a different manner, less constrained (though not completely) by gender roles and sexism. Women writers today can express themselves in ways she could not, describe female characters who suffer just as obviously as male ones, and write stories with endings that do not resolve their characters' pain.

I never want to shy away from writing about pain (an unfortunate predilection for one of my housemates, who once asked me, “Do you have anything *happy* I can read?”). It is writing which discusses pain that can help heal its readers the most. Therefore, though I cannot predict that a set of six stories will definitely help heal anybody, I still set out to tackle loaded topics people are often, understandably, not

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<sup>1</sup> Please note that nineteenth-century and contemporary objections to Austen alike have been swayed, no matter how much everybody wants to deny it, by a pervasive misogynistic disdain for focusing on women – whom people so often see as more empty-headed and undeserving than men – in literature.

eager to discuss: abortion, psychosis, same-sex attraction, major depression, self-harm, substance abuse, teenage pregnancy, premature death, neglectful and abusive parenting, and suicide. I did not, I should mention, mean to cram every uncomfortable subject under the sun into these pieces to make a statement or to present myself as a deep individual. Instead, I wanted these stories, as most stories do, to center on what it means to be a human who experiences both loss and isolation.

My last remarks are these: these pieces are screenshots of Grosner, a little look into the lives of its inhabitants through different points of view. This is why I thought it would be more appropriate to set the stories as separate pieces instead of fusing them inside a novella, a literary form which usually requires a higher level of narrative consistency. I also thought, when I first started writing this thesis, that I needed to tie everything together in the end in a way that satisfied my own sense of curiosity, if not my (sometimes-present) desire for happy endings. I wanted to know specifically what these characters would do after high school, which relationships they would maintain, and how they would end up interacting with their families and friends. I now realize, however, that I did not set out to write biographies or autobiographies. Instead, I wanted to give the sense that this little town of Grosner has existed before these characters and will exist after the end of this collection.

This is a town that has been, and remains, beyond the end of this thesis, haunted – not by the supernatural, but by people. It is consumed by an unrest composed of silence, filled with individuals who – like everyone – desperately need their stories to be told. And though these statements are bleak, the thought that characters can live both in and without words, as well as the knowledge that writing

can bring people together, is comforting. The stories of these people, much like the common struggles that tie humans together, are not limited by paper, but rather shared through it.

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