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University of Nevada, Reno

Fathom: A Collection of Short Stories

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of

**BACHELOR OF ARTS IN ENGLISH—WRITING
AND THE HONORS PROGRAM**

by

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May, 2013

**UNIVERSITY
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RENO**

THE HONORS PROGRAM

We recommend that the thesis
prepared under our supervision by

IRIS SALTUS

entitled

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ABSTRACT

This collection of short stories explores four different psychological disorders: post-traumatic stress disorder, impulse control disorder, substance abuse disorder, and bipolar disorder. The goal of this exploration is to expose a narrative of each disorder. By going into the lives of the different characters portrayed in the short stories, an insight into these disorders is presented to the reader. While an explanation of each disorder and how it occurs in each story is included in an afterward, each story subtly exposes a real world situation in which these disorders could appear and invites the reader to experience that world.

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Author's Note

Fathom is defined as (1) *n.* a unit of measurement equal to six feet: used chiefly in nautical measurements, (2) *v.* to penetrate the truth of; comprehend; understand. While this collection does not contain stories of sea adventures or the reoccurrence of sixes, it does delve into what is beneath the surface of a person and seeks to create an understanding through narrative. The four short stories in this collection will read explore four different psychological disorders: post-traumatic stress disorder, impulse control disorder, substance use disorder, and bipolar disorder.

Gunmetal

The projector is already set up for World War II film day as Zoe walks into the classroom. She pauses just inside the door and scans the room for Aaron. Not seeing him, she claims a seat in the third row.

Just as the bell starts to ring, Aaron arrives, sauntering into the room after bidding farewell to his friends. He makes eye contact with Zoe and beelines to the seat next to her. “Hey you,” he whispers as he slips into the chair.

Zoe leans over, but keeps her eyes straight ahead. “Way to be late.”

“Clearly, I’m not late.”

The teacher stands in front of the class, taking roll.

“Are you sure you’re okay with this?” Aaron gestures toward the screen with concerned eyes.

“I’ll be fine. I think.” Zoe notices her clenched fists and laughs as she releases the tension. Aaron reaches over to hold her small hand, but she recoils, smiling, tucking her hands under the table.

“Okay, so, World War II.” The teacher claps his hands together, readjusts his tie, and starts reviewing what he has been lecturing on for the last couple of days. He then introduces the movie they are going to watch: a History Channel production, naturally, “The Last Days of World War II.” Zoe prays that she won’t have to see any footage of battle. She has been making deals with all different kinds of deities to bring her dad home safe from Afghanistan. Many of the men in World War II never came home.

The lights go out and the documentary starts. Zoe's eyes flee from the screen the second she sees a soldier. Her arms pull tightly around her body, but not tightly enough to provide any real comfort.

Aaron shuffles in his seat, removing his sweatshirt. He holds the gray ball of cloth in front of Zoe. "You look cold."

She stares at it for a second and then slowly unbinds herself to accept the gift.

"Your dad is safe. Don't worry." Aaron whispers in her ear.

Zoe can only nod. She slides the garment over her head and hides in the hood.

The bell finally rings, signaling the end of class and the end of the school day. Zoe slowly exits her cave, collects her things, and follows Aaron out of the room. As they walk to her locker, Aaron wraps his arm around Zoe and rubs her shoulder. Zoe's anguish subsides as they reach her locker.

"Math help tonight?" She speaks more toward the combination lock than to Aaron.

"Yeah." His tone sounds off.

"You okay? You don't have to. I know my incompetence is torture for you." Zoe playfully brushes his arm.

"No, no. We can. I'll give you a call tonight after practice."

"You better." She sticks her tongue out at him. "Oh, do you want your sweatshirt back?"

"Nah. I don't need it."

"Are you sure? Can I give it back to you tomorrow?"

"Whenever." He turns to look behind him.

“I’ll try not to lose it.” Zoe and Aaron exchange smiles and a hug good-bye before going their separate ways. Zoe heads home for the day, and Aaron leaves to meet up with his friends for football practice.

She walks out to her car, heels clacking on the pavement with every step. Her keys jingle in her hand as she walks down the row of cars searching for her silver Envoy.

Her brother is standing at the back of the car. “Jed, what are you doing?”

“Can I get a ride home?”

“The bus isn’t good enough for you?” Her shoulders slump.

“Why ride the bus when you can drive?” A smug smile stretches across his face.

Zoe rolls her eyes and mumbles for him to get in the car. Her brother runs around to the opposite side of the car and gets in to ride shotgun.

There is silence in the car for the beginning of the trip, broken only by millisecond bits of music while Jed tries unsuccessfully to find something on the radio.

Finally finding some god awful nineties rap music, Jed leans back in his seat.

“We’re not listening to this.” Zoe leans forward and changes the station.

“What are you doing?” He springs forward and tries to relocate the station.

“Well, we sure as hell aren’t going to listen to that crap.” She turns the radio off.

Jed instantly turns it back on. “How can you not appreciate the musical genius that is Nas? Illmatic is like, da best album eva made, yo.”

“Jed. You’re white and live in the suburbs.”

“Don’ be hatin’, ho,” he says, throwing a fake gang sign.

“Jesus Christ.” Zoe rubs her forehead, resting her elbow on the door for several seconds before putting her hand back on the wheel.

The never ending power struggle for control of the radio continues for the next fifteen minutes. Zoe finally pulls into their driveway, turns off the car, and looks over at her brother. “Get the fuck out.”

Jed’s chuckle ticks Zoe off even more. She walks into the house swearing she’ll never take him home again.

“Hey Zoe.”

“Hey Mom.” Zoe tosses her keys into the bowl by the door.

“You really don’t have to drive him home, you know.”

“Yeah,” Zoe says through an exasperated sigh, “I know.”

“How was school?”

“Fine.” She picks up the remote from the coffee table and situates herself on the couch.

Her mother sits at the island in the kitchen facing her. “Did you want to invite Aaron over for dinner?”

“Oh Mom, don’t do that.” Jed walks into the kitchen and opens the fridge. “You know he wants to date her. Don’t torture the guy more than Zoe already is.”

“I’m just trying to be nice! She’s always at his house for dinner. I feel I should return the favor.”

“We’re just friends, all right? We’re both okay with being just friends.” Zoe tries to end the conversation there.

“People that are *just friends* don’t have dinner dates. Or go out to the movies every weekend. Or spend *hours* at each other’s houses,” Jed counts on his fingers.

“We don’t go to the movies *every* weekend!”

“I rest my case.”

Zoe shakes her head and goes back to watching the Tyra Banks Show.

Seven o’clock rolls around and Zoe still hasn’t heard from Aaron. She figures his practice has run late and leaves him a text to forget about tutoring for the night and that she’ll see him tomorrow.

#

Zoe wakes up the next morning to four texts, all asking her if she knows where Aaron is. She responds that she hasn’t heard from him and inquires as to why they’re asking. Aaron’s friends sometimes text her to see where he is at any given time. While she didn’t control his social calendar, he usually told her what he would be doing or where he would be going—mostly because she went with him a majority of the time. She has yet to hear back from any of his friends as she walks out the door to head to school and figures the issue, whatever it was, has been resolved.

She arrives at school, but something keeps her from getting out of the car. She sits for a moment, her stomach starting to knot, and scans the pond of cars in the lot for Aaron’s. He’s always there before she is, and they typically meet up at her locker in the mornings. But his black Chevy truck isn’t in its usual place.

She walks slowly toward the building, craning her neck around, double checking for his truck. A slight panic sets in, and she sends him a quick text as she walks into the building. *Hey, are you sick today?*

She is no more than ten steps past the door when one of Aaron’s friends calls to her.

“Zoe!” His voice is shaking.

“Hey, Matt.” She turns around to see Matt’s worried, pink face. “What’s wrong?”

“Um,” he looks off to the left, seemingly unable to make eye contact. “Aaron’s missing.”

“Missing?” Her lungs freeze as if she has just inhaled liquid nitrogen. A wave of skepticism makes the moment even more uncomfortable. “What do you mean *missing*?”

“He wasn’t at practice last night, and he wasn’t at home when a couple of us went to go see if he was okay. He’s not answering his phone. No one knows where he is.”

“What?” Her mind can’t process the input of *Aaron is missing. Aaron is a missing person.* The skepticism slowly drains, and her chest tightens even more.

“Yeah. We went over to his house last night and…” Zoe assumes he’s still talking, but she can’t hear anything. Her vision blurs, and her whole body goes numb. The bell rings, and Matt walks away, but Zoe is left stranded in paralysis in the middle of the hall. People bump past her, eventually forcing her to put one foot in front of the other. She doesn’t stop at her locker. She doesn’t return waves. She walks straight to homeroom, feeling as though someone has ripped her heart out and then punched her in the stomach. She keeps thinking that it has to be some kind of misunderstanding. Maybe he was going on vacation and just didn’t mention it to anyone.

The day continues on in a fog as Zoe wanders from class to class. She can’t focus on the letters scribbled on the board or the noise coming from the teachers’ mouths. The only time she speaks is to inform friends of Aaron’s disappearance. The more people she tells, the more the reality of his absence sinks in. Just before her lunch period, Zoe throws up and is sent home.

#

Zoe lies on the couch, curled around a throw pillow with her eyes locked on the brunette delivering the news of Aaron's disappearance. The insincere worry that the anchor is trying to pass off infuriates her. Zoe keeps calling Aaron's cell phone, praying that this next time he'll pick up.

Jed plops himself next to her, but Zoe doesn't look over. "They'll find him."

Her breath gets caught in her throat as she lays her head on her folded arms.

"They will." Jed pats her knee, gets up, and quietly walks to the kitchen.

Zoe looks up, dabbing her face with her sleeves. She turns back to the television—back to an ignorant, smiling, laughing meteorologist. Anger overwhelms her, and she whips the pillow at the TV

"Aaron, it's Zoe," she fights through tears as she runs upstairs to her room.

"Please pick up your phone. Everyone's looking for you. Where are you? Please call me or the police or anyone when you get this. Please." She hangs up the phone and slides to the floor, pulling a pillow from her bed and clutching it against her chest. She looks around her room, thoughts overcrowding her mind. *Where could he be? When will he return her calls? Why doesn't anyone know where he is? What could have happened to him?*

She notices something gray hanging limp on the edge of her bed. She pulls it down, realizing what it is. She holds his sweatshirt, the one he gave her just yesterday. Smelling his scent still captured in the fabric, she buries her face in the memory, hoping it won't be the last. She relives their movie nights, their walks in the mosquito infested woods by the high school, the first time she went to his house to watch a football game,

and the first time he ate dinner at her house. She remembers the first time she met him and his smile that made her so at ease in a new school. Zoe breathes in Aaron's scent from the sweatshirt again. She remembers the nights they sat close to each other in Aaron's basement, watching horror movies and talking about school.

She closes her eyes, trying to remember every moment she spent with him.

#

The search continues for the Richard Reign High School student reported missing three days ago. Aaron James, a junior and star running back at the Carlisle high school, was reported missing Wednesday morning...

A blonde is centered in the screen this time, also feigning sincerity. Zoe hasn't eaten, slept, or left the glow of the television since that first night of Aaron's disappearance. She's never gone this long without talking to Aaron and finds herself not able to do anything but think about him.

Surrounded by blankets and technology, Zoe sits on the couch wearing Aaron's gray Nike sweatshirt. It's far too big for her, but being in its embrace comforts her, if only slightly. She stares at her phone, gnawing anxiously on the pull strings and soaking them with saliva. Her heart pounds in anticipation of a call from Aaron. Phantom rings happen more and more often, each giving her a minor heart attack and a surge of hope that this ordeal will be over.

Footsteps sound above her head, signaling her mom's rise from bed and the arrival of 400 hours. Her mother tiptoes down the stairs and stops at the archway to the living room. "Any news?"

"None yet."

“Don’t give up hope. They’ll find him.” Her mother’s voice is wavering in confidence. “You should eat something, baby. Do you want me to cook you some bacon?”

“No.”

“Pancakes, waffles, muffins, anything? You need to eat.”

“I don’t want to.” Zoe’s lips quiver, and a drop of salt water glides down her cheek.

Her mom goes back upstairs to get ready for work, and Zoe turns to her laptop, where Aaron’s face smiles at her from his profile picture. She endlessly refreshes his page, trying to will a new status to appear at the top.

Her mother once again enters the room, walking cautiously over to Zoe with a box of tissues. She places the box on the back of the couch behind Zoe, kisses her, and makes a silent exit from the house.

To her surprise, Jed thunders down the stairs shortly after her mother’s departure. Zoe glances over at him as he pours himself a bowl of cereal in the glow of the television. He joins her in the living room, sitting on the floor in front of the couch.

“Why are you up so early?”

Jed doesn’t say anything, just shrugs his shoulders and shovels spoonfuls of Frosted Mini Wheats into his mouth.

“Do you think he’s just lost somewhere?” Zoe throws her most optimistic conclusion out into the open.

Jed chews for a second and swallows loudly. “He’s a guy. Guys don’t get lost.”

Zoe sucks in air, trying not to think of the worst case scenario.

Zoe feels a warm hand rubbing her back. “Hey. Hey, hey, hey. I’m just saying there’s nothing to worry about. Wherever he is, he’s okay. It’s like how Dad is. We can’t think he’s hurt if we don’t hear from him for a while. We can’t live like that. Wherever Aaron is, he’s okay too.”

“That’s different.” Zoe’s pitch keeps ascending. “Dad’s in a fucking war and *can’t* talk to us every day. Aaron should be here. There’s no reason for him to be gone like this.”

#

It’s nearly noon and Zoe is stuck in the endless cycle of refreshing Aaron’s Facebook page. Several people from school have left messages on his wall asking him to come home. She refreshes the page again. A new comment appears on his wall: *Why, man? Why’d you have to do this? You should have called me. Called anyone. You didn’t have to do this. I hope you found your peace. I’ll miss you, buddy.* Zoe’s heart starts racing. “Miss you? What happened?” She starts to respond, frantically trying to get any information she can.

The TV answers her. *Breaking news of the missing Richard Reign High School student. Aaron James, who has been missing for four days, was found dead in his car four hours north of his home in Kinzua Bridge State Park. He was found by a group of hunters earlier this morning. Police are not releasing any further details. We’ll report any updates to you as they become available to us.*

Zoe’s hands cup her mouth. Her eyes widen in disbelief. Her mind is empty. Text after text lines up in her inbox as her phone buzzes nonstop. She’s motionless, staring at the smiling picture of someone no longer alive. She pulls the cuffs of the

sweatshirt over her shaking hands and presses them against her face. She doesn't believe she won't talk to him again. She doesn't believe she won't walk with him in the hallways again. She doesn't believe she won't sit next to him at a movie, or in class, or at dinner.

She stares at her computer screen as comments and statuses about Aaron flood her news feed. She begins to write a status of her own, but stops, unable to fight through the tears.

She sits back and stares at the blurred outline of her phone balanced on the arm of the couch. The anticipation of hearing from Aaron is gone. Zoe picks up her phone and holds it in her damp hands. Wiping away tears, writes a new message, "I miss you," and sends it to Aaron.

#

Monday rolls around, and Zoe's return to school looms ahead. Her alarm chimes, but gently allows her to sleep through it. A short while after the alarm fails to stir her, Jed knocks loudly on the door. "Hey Zo! Mom said to make sure you get to school today. So, up and at 'em!"

She opens her eyes, but she doesn't move. Zoe faces the white door to her room, listening to her brother's muffled voice. She pushes herself up out of bed, causing bundles of tissues to fall to the floor.

She stares at herself in the mirror—at her extra baggy sweatpants and unwashed black hair—then eyeballs a pair of jeans hanging on the back of a chair. She looks back at her full body reflection. "This is fine." She slips on her Ugg boots and tucks the bottom of her sweatpants into them. She plucks a sweatshirt off the floor, grabs her books, and heads out the door with Jed leading the way.

As her hand begins to pull the handle on the car door, it hits her that Aaron won't be at school today. Or ever. Jed stops too as he notices Zoe caught in a trance. "Zoe? It's going to be okay. Baby steps. Just think about Dad coming in a couple weeks."

She nods and finishes opening the door.

As they arrive at school, Zoe can't avoid the habit of looking for Aaron's car. She pulls into a parking space and thuds her head against the steering wheel, watching tears pool on the beige surface.

"Jed?" She rubs her eyes with her sweatshirt sleeve.

"Yeah?" His voice is soft.

"I can't do this."

"Yes you can. You can't stop living because he isn't."

Zoe nods, though her face is scrunched and damp. Jed gets out of the car first with Zoe following soon after.

"Are you going to be okay?" Jed opens the door to the school for Zoe.

She nods again, sucking her lips in, trying not to cry.

"You should call mom if you want to go home." He looks at her the way her father would look at her: Eyebrows raised, head bent down slightly. "You'll be fine."

Jed walks away, checking back after he takes a few steps forward.

Zoe hugs her books close to her chest, the way socially inept freshman hold theirs, and inches to her locker. She opens it, and her eyes immediately lock on the pictures hanging inside. Her trembling hand slowly reaches toward one of the pictures affixed to the metal door by a daisy magnet. She yanks the picture off the door, flinging the magnet to the floor.

Zoe leans forward, slamming her head on the locker door, and starts to sob. She looks into his eyes, into the life captured in the photograph—a life that no longer exists outside of photographs. A crowd forms around her, but Zoe doesn't care.

“Zoe. Zoe, come on.” A hand pulls on her arm, trying to remove her from her locker door. “Zoe, go home.” She deciphers Jed's voice in the talk surrounding her. Her eyes follow his outline as he picks up her purse and shuts her locker. “Come on.” He pulls harder on her arm, finally getting Zoe to sever herself from the wall. Jed laboriously walks her out to the car.

He opens the driver's side door, and Zoe reluctantly climbs in. She hunches over, wraps her hands around the top of the steering wheel, and presses her forehead against her knuckles.

“Zoe, you need to go home.”

She nods, but doesn't make any movements to leave.

“Zoe. I'm gonna go back in, okay? Call Mom.”

She nods again, finally turning to fish her keys out from her purse. Jed closes the door and jogs back to the building. Zoe, trembling, finds it near impossible to insert the key into the ignition. She finally gets the rectangle peg into the rectangle hole, starts the car, and somehow manages to drive herself home.

The Envoy comes to a stop in the driveway. Zoe leans back in the seat and looks up at the beige fabric lined ceiling in the car. She screams a melody of pain, sadness, frustration, regret, and fear.

Zoe shuffles into the house, unable to breathe. She drops her things in front of the door and locks herself in the bathroom. She huddles over the sink, swinging back and forth, trying to calm herself.

She drags herself out of the bathroom and collapses on the floor next to the pile of her books and personal effects. Zoe slams the purse into her lap, chucking lip gloss, pens, and a calculator from her purse until she reaches her phone. She sits back against the wall and calls her mom.

“Zoe? What’s wrong?”

“Mommy. I can’t. I can’t. He’s not there. He’s gone, Mom.”

“Honey, slow down. Where are you? Are you at school?”

“No. I’m at. Home.” Zoe gasps for air.

“Okay. I’m going to try to get off work. Just breathe, okay? Write a letter to your dad.”

Zoe is thrown off by the suggestion. “Why? He’ll be home soon.”

“Because it always helps. I’ll try to be home in an hour or so. Get a glass of water, okay? I’m sorry, baby, I wish there was more I could do.”

Zoe doesn’t move for a solid five minutes. She wishes that everything could go back to how it was only seven days ago. Eventually, she gains enough strength to make her way to her room.

She sits at her desk, staring at the teardrops that fall on the piece of paper, blurring the blue lines.

She takes out a clean sheet.

Hey Dad,

Teardrop. Clean sheet.

Hey Dad,

I know you'll be home in a few week, and this letter won't get to you. Blame Mom. She said to write it. I hope all your flights go well. I can't imagine having to be on planes and in airports for more than 8 hours.

Hope the desert treats you well the last week you're there. It's not really hot here yet. Humid though. You missed a pretty good downpour a couple weeks ago. Nothing flooded too bad. A lake formed out back for a day or two though. Basement stayed dry.

Looks like I'll be getting straight A's again this year. Tutoring has definitely helped the weak fronts.

Aaron's dead. He killed himself. Sorry to change the subject so abruptly. You'll probably know about it before you read this. I saw him the day he did it. A couple hours before. He was fine. It's so confusing. Then I just have visions of you and wondering if you're still alive. I don't like death, dad. Why does it have to happen? I know you've been around it more than I have. Didn't know if you had any insight on that or not. Advice would be greatly appreciated at this point. I wish you were home.

Love,

Z

#

A few days before the funeral, Zoe receives a call from an unknown number. *Hi, this is Amber, the voicemail begins. I'm Aaron's aunt. We know that you were a big part of Aaron's life, and we wanted to invite you to speak at his funeral. Um, if you could call*

me back and let me know that you get this message, that would be really helpful. We all hope you're doing okay.

She replays the message.

Zoe isn't much of a public speaker and worries that she won't have much to say. She replays the message again, letting the reality of Aaron's death sink in even further.

"Hey, Mom?" Zoe walks into the kitchen where her mom is preparing dinner.

"What do people say at funerals?"

"What do you mean?" She stops stirring the Hollandaise sauce.

"Aaron's aunt called me to ask if I could speak at his funeral."

Zoe's mom brings her in for a hug. "Well. You can talk about memories that you have about him and things you want to share from when he was alive."

"Is he really dead?" Zoe doesn't understand why she keeps questioning whether he died or not.

"He is, sweetie. But you have all your memories. He's not gone forever." She strokes Zoe's hair. "Did you tell them you were going to speak?"

"I haven't called back."

"You should. If not for him, then do it for you. He was a huge part of *your* life just as you were a huge part of his."

Zoe smiles at her mom as her eyes begin to water. She sits on the couch, only being able to remember being there waiting to hear from Aaron and watching the news report his death. She only remembers Matt's face when he told her that Aaron had shot himself. The only things Zoe can think of are the negative memories.

She takes out her phone and goes through her picture gallery, hoping to come across a good memory of Aaron. His smile appears in a photo she doesn't remember taking. He took a picture of himself with her phone and added some special effects. Zoe smiles, but she can't get the happiness and good memories she had hoped for. She's stuck thinking about everything that has gone wrong.

#

Zoe opens her eyes the next morning to a spot of dried tears on her pillow. She tries to remember the most recent dream she had about Aaron, but has no such luck. She's been dreaming about Aaron every night, but these dreams turn into nightmares when her brain creates scenes of Aaron holding the gun up to his head. She sometimes sees Aaron walking into school with a gaping hole in his head or a bloody skull. Other times she sees his body with no head at all. When she has those dreams, she almost always wakes up hyperventilating, soaked in sweat.

Her head starts to hurt, but she sits up in bed and gets dressed to go eat some breakfast anyway. She thinks food is probably a good idea. She slowly walks down the stairs and into the kitchen, planning what to eat while counting her steps.

"Dad? Holy crap, Dad, you're home!" She runs up to him and throws her arms around his sweaty neck. He looks different, but Zoe recognized him the moment she saw him. "When did you get here?"

"About two hours ago. I wanted to surprise you guys. I'm surprised your mom didn't wake you up with the noise she made when I told her to come pick me up." His voice is tired, but content.

Zoe looks over at her mom, whose glowing smile inspires Zoe to smile even wider.

“Does Jed know? Where’s Jed?”

“Let it surprise him too when he wakes up,” her dad insists.

“How long was the flight?” Zoe’s heart is still pounding from excitement.

The Sergeant Major smiles, running his hand over his longer, grayer hair. “Had to have been thirty hours.”

“That sucks.”

“Yeah.” His face appears older than Zoe remembers as she looks into his eyes. He’s dirty. Specs of black and tan varying in size cover most of his skin.

“I’m glad you’re home, Dad. So glad.” Zoe smiles, genuinely smiles, for the first time since Aaron disappeared. Even though a mess of conflicting emotions pools in her stomach, she knows she is lucky to have her dad come home.

“Well, I’m going to take a shower. I need some hot water and nice soap.”

“And then we’re all going to go out to dinner and watch Sports Center on the couch and watch movies and be thankful that your dad is home.” Zoe’s mom adds, kissing the Sergeant Major’s dirty cheek.

Zoe hugs her dad tightly before he goes upstairs, feeling his rough hands rub her back. As she hears her dad’s footsteps ascend the stairs, she wonders if the universe is playing a cruel game of chess with her life. Her father was able to come home safe and sound because Aaron’s life was sacrificed. *What if Aaron hadn’t killed himself? Would Dad still have lived?* She remembers saying she would give anything for her dad to make it home alive.

#

“I’m sorry to hear about Aaron.” Despite having to leave in six hours for Aaron’s funeral, Zoe hasn’t slept. Her father stays up with her, still jetlagged.

“I just don’t understand why he would kill himself. Why he would put a gun to his head, and actually pull the trigger? Why would he do that? Why was he so unhappy? What was missing?” Zoe looks up at her father.

He braces himself against the counter, looking into Zoe’s puffy eyes. He doesn’t say anything immediately. His usual fatherly demeanor hasn’t returned. “You can’t know. There’s no way to know. Some people fight a very painful war, and no one ever sees it.”

“But how could he not tell me? We spent like, every day together for the past year and a half. Why wouldn’t he tell me? Why couldn’t I see it?”

“Zoe.” He pauses, handing a tissue to his sniffling daughter. “Some people just don’t talk about their emotions. You just can’t know what people think sometimes, okay? People die. People die all the fucking time.”

She rests her chin on her fist, staring off at nothing in particular through the kaleidoscope of teary vision. Her dad starts to scare her, but her mind is still focused enough on Aaron—focused on not wanting to believe that there wasn’t *something* she could have done—that she completely ignores his out of character aggression.

Zoe watches silently as her dad whips up a cup of hot cocoa and presents it to her with a heaping mound of marshmallows on top. He practically drops it on the counter and takes a deep sigh.

Zoe takes a sip of the hot cocoa and licks the froth from her lip. “Dad?”

“Yeah?” He sits on the stool next to her at the island.

“Are you okay?”

“Never better. So you liked this kid, right? Why not date him?”

“Dad!” Zoe is embarrassed by the question and a little confused as to the sudden change of topic. “I liked him a lot, but we’re gonna move at some point. And that seemed unfair to him. Long distance relationships don’t work, do they?”

“What about your mom and I? We’ve made it.” Her father seems to be having trouble being optimistic. “You *cannot* skip over opportunities like that when they’re presented to you. You just gotta take the initiative. You can’t be afraid.”

“Too late now,” Zoe mumbles into the cup.

“Well, yes it is.” His voice turns cold. “Learn from it. Stop being so afraid. Stop worrying about me. I’ll be dead someday, too. I’m going to try and get some shut-eye before we go.” He stands straight up and walks off.

Zoe is left thinking about what her dad has said, and regret and sadness fills her up just as fast as the hot cocoa does.

#

It’s far too sunny for a funeral. The stained glass windows paint the sanctuary an ill-fitting collage of warm colors. Hundreds of people have come to pay their respects, and people are forced to line the walls of the sanctuary as seating space becomes scarce.

The matte black coffin is surrounded by flowers with a football sitting on top. A picture of Aaron at a football game rests atop the coffin next to the football. A large print of Aaron’s most recent school picture sits on an easel at the right corner of the

coffin. Some of Aaron's teammates place memorabilia at the foot of the coffin. Zoe feels guilty that she didn't bring something to leave with Aaron.

Zoe's hand is firmly held in her mother's grasp as the funeral starts. Aaron's mom and dad are the first to speak. Zoe can't stand to see Mrs. James cry. She has spoken to her many times over dinner at Aaron's house. She trembles at the podium. "Aaron was always full of life. He loved sports, he loved his truck, he loved his friends. And everyone loved him." She breaks off and is unable to finish. Aaron's dad holds her tightly against his chest and walks her back to the pew. Zoe's face is covered in salt water. It starts to dry but is quickly replenished.

Matt now takes the podium. He looks over at the framed picture of Aaron with his parents after his first victory on the varsity football team. "I remember that game." He pauses, looks down at Aaron's parents, and tries to hold back tears as he looks back at the picture. "He was so nervous about that game. It seemed like—it seemed like he was the only one worried about a poor performance. I remember he had over a hundred rushing yards that game. His first game in the big leagues, and he did that." He turns back to the podium with his hands visibly shaking. "Aaron and I met in fifth grade when I moved here from Delaware. He was the only kid who talked to me that first year. Then in middle school, we started playing football together. And in high school, I learned what kind of man Aaron grew up to be.

"He wasn't the typical guy on the field. He never complained—only worked. We always called him 'Sunshine' because he always knew how to cheer us up. Either after a loss or after a bad practice, he was the one still wearing a smile telling everyone exactly what they did best." He pauses, catching his breath. "Aaron was the smartest guy I

know. He started tutoring, wanting to help people and make them feel better. He volunteered all the time. I just wonder,” he rubs his nose and shifts his weight, “I wonder what could have led him to make the choice he did. I wonder what—I wonder why. Why couldn’t he make himself as happy as he made everyone else? Why couldn’t he see how much of a difference he made in other people’s lives? One day, when I get to heaven, I’ll ask him. Until then, I’ll miss you, man.”

He holds his hands up to his forehead as he leaves the podium and walks into the embrace of Aaron’s family.

Zoe’s hands start to shake as she waits for her cue to take the podium. She slowly gets up, and her mom pats her on the back. “You can do it, honey,” she whispers. Zoe struggles to walk in a straight line down the aisle. She reaches the podium and stands unsteadily behind it, looking out at all the other tearful faces. “Aaron and I,” she reaches up to move the microphone down to her level, “Aaron and I met only a couple years ago. He was my math tutor for some of that time, but he became one of the best friends I’ve ever had.” Giant tears begin to fall onto the podium, and Zoe tries, with limited success, to wipe away every tear as it appears. “He always knew how to cheer me up. He could always tell when something was bothering me. When my dad was deployed, he’d make sure to ask how things were going. Make sure I was okay.” Attempting to control her sadness becomes futile, and she lets herself cry. “I wish I could have done the same for him. I wish I could have made sure he was okay. I’m sorry.”

Zoe hurries away from the podium, gasping for breath through the sobs. She runs past her family, flings open the doors to the narthex, and sprints out to the car. She tears

at the handle, but the car is locked and her mom has the keys. She slams her elbows on the hood of the car, digging her fingertips into her skull.

The Sergeant Major's footsteps calmly approach to her left. She looks up, seeing the keys in his hand and a blank expression on his face. He unlocks the car and Zoe races inside, slamming the door behind her and curling into a ball on the seat. Another door opens, and her father gets into the driver's seat.

"I'm sure Aaron appreciated that." His voice is gentle and supportive.

"He didn't hear it." Her arms slam against the cloth seats on either side of her condensed body.

"I believe he did."

Zoe's sobs begin to subside.

"One of the boys in my regiment committed suicide." Zoe looks up at him. His eyes stare at the passenger seat headrest. "Young kid—eighteen or so—on his first deployment. A couple months in and he had had enough, I guess." His breath quivers. "Took his rifle or a pistol and shot himself."

Zoe's eyes widen. She doesn't know what to say, but her tears stop.

"One of the lieutenants found him. It was brought to my attention. It's a horrible thing, death. Worse when you're not expecting it. And unbearable when it isn't at the hand of God or the enemy." He takes some deep breaths and continues. "I'd rather my men die from a sniper, from a shot in the neck—we had plenty of those too—rather than from a shot in the mouth by their own hand. Thirty-seven men died from suicide in our division. Thirty-seven."

Her dad's eyes glaze over. She can almost see an image of each soldier running through his mind.

"I couldn't stop them. I am—was—their superior. It was my duty to keep them safe. To keep the men keeping them safe, safe. And I failed. I failed my mission."

All Zoe can do is watch her dad fight back everything he was feeling. She thinks back to when he first came home. *Why didn't he say anything then?*

"What else happened?"

"I don't want to talk about it right now, Zo. This is Aaron's day—not mine."

"I love you, Dad." Zoe tires to apologize for asking a question her dad clearly does not want to answer.

"I love you too."

#

Zoe weaves between boxes piled in the dark. It's early on a Saturday morning, four months since Aaron was found. It's a moving weekend: Zoe's dad has been reassigned, and they start their drive to Florida tomorrow after packing everything onto the truck today. Zoe has something more important to do today, though. She quietly slips on her shoes and tiptoes down the stairs. Her dad is waiting at the door. He hasn't slept.

The cemetery is about thirty-five minutes away. Zoe always made plans to go visit his gravestone, but she could never bring herself to see it. She went once, shortly after the funeral, but she kept thinking about her nightmares. She didn't want to see the nightmares, so she didn't go back. Today is different though. Today is good-bye forever.

Zoe parks near the cemetery gates and slowly begins to make the journey to his grave. Her father follows silently behind her. She leads the way across the dry grass, trying to remember the quickest way to his grave. Finally reaching Aaron's tombstone, she kneels down, silently repeating the epitaph in her mind. "Beloved son and friend. Your light will be missed." She gently tilts a picture of the two of them from his seventeenth birthday party up against the stone. She takes a roll of paper out of her bag, holds it up against the headstone, and reaches for an ebony pencil.

She holds the rubbing in front of her, examining the letters that emerge from the scribbles. She rolls the paper back up and holds it gently in her hand. Leaning back onto her heels, "Dad?" She looks up to his strong face—the face that has always been there for her. A face that is suffering with her. "How do you deal with it?"

Her father tucks his hands into the front pockets of his jeans. "Just gotta remember that life is temporary. We'll all get there. Some people just take the express lane. Do you still dream about him?"

"Yup. I still see his face on other people sometimes, too. Do you still dream about them?"

"Every night."

Zoe pushes herself up off the ground and hugs her dad, burying her face in his chest and leaving a pattern of tears and mascara. She turns back to the grave marker and places a hand on the cold stone. Tears splash onto the granite. "I'm sorry I didn't save you."

She begins to walk, head lowered, away from the stone. Her father wraps his arm around her and rubs her shoulder as they walk together out of the cemetery.

Extinguished

I stood there in awe of the magnificence, closed my eyes, and inhaled the ashy air. My skin absorbed the soft glow of the flames; my hair stood on end, reaching for the inferno. It pulled me. Like hot glue, warm and effective, I was stuck to the fire. The yellow arms gleefully waved at me from afar. The small embers swirled into the air, drawing a line of light before they went cold and dark.

Sirens came into range, signaling my time to leave. I walked slowly, calculating the route the fire engines would take. I needed to avoid suspicion. They were looking for me. I took the most indirect route possible to my car parked about a mile away. My fingers lamented having to touch the cold metal handle. I sat in the chilled dampness of a piece of shit they call a car and listened closely to the sound of the fire trucks.

I turned the ignition. The tips of my fingers tingled, knowing they had just lit a spark. My sneakers squeaked against the gas pedal as I drove out of the development and back into town, back to the apartment that I hated so much. I had to be at work in two hours, but I couldn't sleep. My body was still pumping adrenaline.

I sat up in bed and looked at the boxes of matches, used and unused, strewn about my room. Lighters, full, empty, and all levels in between, were on every surface. The carpet, though not particularly in good shape when I started my lease, was covered with burn spots and ash. The room looked like it had been through a fire itself—kind of gray and smoky. I liked it that way. No one ever came to my apartment, so it wasn't of much concern to me what other people would think of it.

My craving was satisfied, though my hands still wanted something to do. They twitched less and less frequently as the high subsided. Still, they reached for the closest lighter I had on my nightstand and began flicking flames into being. My lips narrowed and my lungs pushed out just enough air to make the flame wobble but not fall down. My lips relaxed, my diaphragm drew in more air, and the process repeated.

Twenty minutes passed—a shower was in order. I was sure it would have been suspicious if I showed up to work smelling like a campfire. The smell of kerosene and char were replaced by a more socially acceptable scent—cucumber melon. I did my best to look as presentable as possible before heading off to work, although I couldn't tell if the dark circles under my eyes were due to a lack of sleep or allergies.

Leaving twenty minutes early allowed me to arrive at work only five minutes late. I usually arrived fifteen minutes or so after I was scheduled to begin my shift. Five minutes late was definitely an improvement. Putting together farm machinery was not my ideal career choice, but almost dropping out of high school only to graduate in the bottom ten percent of the class kind of limits one's choices. I wouldn't call myself intellectually challenged by any means; I would call myself giving-a-damn impaired. I was neither interested in the soap opera that is school, nor was I interested in analyzing what Shakespeare was trying to say in *King Lear*. I was interested in doing flame tests in chemistry, though. That was the only week I didn't skip any classes.

That was also the only week in my two years at that particular high school that my parents didn't get an angry letter from the school threatening prosecution due to my truancy or a visit from my long-standing truancy officer, Carl. Eventually, because of my newfound interest in chemistry, my parents petitioned the school to do some kind of

“alternative education plan” where I basically took a bunch of chemistry classes and my mom attempted to teach me English and social studies at home. My mom really wanted me to be able to go to college (neither of my parents had a degree) but a major in chemistry required a lot of other classes that couldn’t be taught by my mother and that under no circumstances would I ever attend. So, after graduation a mere five years ago, I found a job with practically everyone else in this town, making combines and tractors.

I sat down at my place in the assembly line, performing a mindless job that I was pretty sure a computer did in other factories around the nation. But it was a job, and it paid for rent and food and my illicit activities.

“Good morning!” A heavy Mexican accent sounded over the machinery.

“Hi, Carmelo.” Though I wouldn’t necessary consider Carmelo a *friend*, he was one the few people I talked to. “How are you?”

“Good, good. How are you?”

“Decent.”

“Did you hear about the fire this morning?”

“I didn’t catch the news before I left. What happened?” I put down my tools and devoted my full attention to my news story.

“They think it is another arson.”

Thanks to me. “Really? Another one?” I’d mastered feigning innocence. People never picked up on it. “How many is that now?”

“Eleven! It’s insane! They better catch these guys before they kill somebody.”

I reveled for a second in hearing the count. My kind hearted co-worker had no need to worry, though. I did my research before I torched stuff. I didn’t stalk anyone or

sit outside houses with cameras and shit—I'm low-tech. Low-tech mostly because if one were to put anything with a power cord in front of me, all I'd do is try to make a spark. It had happened a few times at work.

So far the police hadn't figured out how I chose my targets. They weren't getting any closer, either. They had been leaning toward drunken high school kids copycatting one another's activities. Logical, but wrong.

I wasn't even an hour into my shift when the day manager called me into his office. There was a cable on his desk, split open with some wires sticking out. It seemed as if the rubber piping around the wires was burned a bit. That was last month's adventure in electrical fires. I wondered why it had taken them so long to find it.

“Lucilla.”

I cringed at the sound of my name. Ever since I was six I'd gone by “Luci,” but my manager wouldn't know that. He probably wouldn't care either.

“We can't have this happening. We have electricians for this. We've given you warnings about this before.” He tried to look the part of an authority figure—hair slicked back with too much gel (so much so that it was flaking), shirt tucked in, and hand gestures like Donald Trump's.

“Of course, sir.” I tried to sound sincere. “They just take several weeks to get to any of our requests.”

“It doesn't matter. This is the seventh time this year that this has happened on your machine.”

It was actually the ninth, but I'll let them figure out the other two.

“I’m sorry, but this is costing the company too much money. We’re going to have to let you go.”

“I’m getting fired?” These threats came my way about every other quarter. I assumed this was another one. They had yet to actually fire me at that point.

“You are fired. You will be paid for one hour today. You can stop by payroll and get your check.”

“Are you serious?”

“Yes. Now please, Ms. Truelson, go home.”

“Wait, you can’t do that. I need this job.”

“Yes, Lucilla, I can. Now go.”

I wasn’t so much in shock about losing my job as I was in shock about the reality of what that entailed. With that last paycheck, I was going to be able to pay for rent and nothing else—no food, no utilities, no luxuries. Hypothetically I could have asked my parents for help, but I hadn’t spoken to them in three years, and I wasn’t about to break that streak. They loved me—I knew they did—they just couldn’t deal with my lifestyle.

I grabbed my things from my locker, threw them in my car, and began the drive home. The traffic sucked, especially for late morning, allowing me far too much time to think. My right hand played with the Zippo I kept in my car as I inched along at speeds ranging from zero to five miles per hour. The thought of burning another house crept into my head, but I had just burned one the night before. Two nights in a row was just too much, even for me.

Nevertheless, once I got home, I went to the internet. I couldn’t help it. I needed an empty house immediately. Foreclosure listings over 120 days old were generally

empty. There were also some abandoned houses on the other side of town. A few clicks later, some help from Google maps, and a quick trip to my closet to decide which accelerant would be best to use, and I had my plan.

#

150 North 141st Street. Abandoned by its former owners after they declared bankruptcy, it was just sitting there waiting for a purpose. The white siding would provide ample food for the fire. The dark blue shutters surrounding the windows would add to it as well—the more the better. It was a two story custom home, next to two vacant lots, and bordered a creek in the back.

Three A.M. Devil's hour. My hour.

No ski masks, no dark clothing, just a t-shirt and sweatpants. You can't bring too much attention to yourself when performing illicit activities. I used to have a dog so it would be even less suspicious to be walking around at night, but that became a hassle and I ended up giving the pup to Carmelo's kids. Thank God dogs can't talk.

I walked across the dry, dead grass around to the backyard. I paused at the back porch, checking for signs of consciousness in the houses close by. All dark. All systems go.

I slipped the can of kerosene out of my backpack as I walked to the back of the house. Vinyl siding—my favorite. I made a lovely shallow lake along the corner where the house and the cement slab of the back porch came together. I took a deep breath, enjoying the aroma of the accelerant. My heart began to pound. It knew what was coming.

I slid my box of matches open and plucked one of the little guys from the depths of darkness. I held the red-head up to the side of the box and struck it to life. It was happy to see me. It had waited so long. My eyes began to cross as I brought it closer to my face. It warmed my nose with love. I blew.

I extracted a second match from the box. This lucky fellow was going to be the start of something sublime. I pushed it against the red honeycombs and held the newborn in front of me.

I ran my hand over the flame. It flickered. It was warm but never painful. It swayed in front of me as I held its life cupped in my hands.

“Time to swim, little darling.” I whispered to the playful child as I tossed it into the kerosene.

The child grew. Flames floated on top of every drop of kerosene. I took a seat at the edge of the porch and watched the flames bump and grind among themselves.

The blaze reminded me of the first time I committed arson. Well, it wasn't really “arson”—I just set the garage on fire. It was more of an accidental fire. Accidental as in, I didn't mean to light the actual *garage* on fire. I only meant to light a can of gasoline on fire. I was nine or ten at the time, and my parents were still under the impression that I was capable of keeping the peace. They were wrong. They knew I had always enjoyed playing with fires and probably had a hunch that it was going to be a problem someday. I'd steal my dad's lighter when he'd go out to smoke, and I had singed my hair plenty of times by the time I was in elementary school.

I don't remember the exact reason for the enticing can of flammable liquid being out in the open just waiting for a friend—I just know that it was. And I know that I

dropped a match into it. And I know that it caught the garage on fire, eating a sizeable hole into the wall and devouring a ladder, some bike tires, and some other burnable nonsense. That was the last time my parents viewed me as “close enough to normal.”

I watched the fire climb, slithering up the side of the house, leaving dark gray footprints behind. I leaned my head against a bench the previous owners had left on the porch and basked in the radiance of the fire.

Mindlessly lounging in front of the fire, I tilted the gasoline can; it swung around, drawing a half circle. I tilted it the other way to complete the circle. The remaining liquid shifted back and forth. I wasn't sure what to do with the extra kerosene. The fire was a little too intense to add more accelerant to it. I was staring at the border of the fire, warming my feet in front of it, when I noticed the tree.

There was a large pine tree not too far from the side of the porch. Pines made the best fire. The branches go up in spectacular flames with smoke, spitting fire, and exploding pinecones. I took the can and held the spout up to the first branch and poured. I got out my box of matches. My fingers were tingling again. I struck the match. My heart beat faster and harder. I reached out and held the match against the liquid film.

I ran back, hearing the massive roar of the flames as they began to devour the tree. When I turned around, I beheld the most beautiful sight of all. Seeing a pine tree ablaze is pure euphoria. I continued stepping back, slowly, tripping over something with every step. The flames climbed even higher, competing to see who could get to the top first. I watched each one flicker. Each was happy.

I had never made anything so magnificent. I was surrounded by the warmth of my art: The brilliance of the yellows, oranges, and reds reaching up to waxing moon. It

was howling to the heavenly body in its own way. The can dropped, my jaw dropped, the world dropped.

Reality check—dogs barking, sirens, neighbors' lights turning on. There couldn't have been sirens. I had spent too much time there. Walking was not an option. I needed to run.

I cut through yards, mangled arms and legs climbing over fences, and ran directly to my get-away vehicle. Fingers numb, I turned the ignition. Flooring it, I sped away from the firemen, the police, and the imprisonment.

The next morning, seeing as how I didn't have a job to go to anymore, I clicked on the TV to the local news. It was going to be cloudy with highs in the low forties. I sat straight up when the next segment began with: *A deadly fire in the early hours of the morning claims the life of an entire family and leaves eight families homeless. That couldn't have been my fire. I didn't kill people. The spokesman for the fire marshal has told reporters that the fire began at an abandoned house on North 141 Street near the complex. Due to the exceptionally dry conditions in Wichita this season, the fire quickly spread, jumping the small stream that separates the two properties, and catching the apartment complex on fire. Investigators believe that the tenants were asleep when the fire started, most likely leading to the injuries and casualties. We'll bring you more information about this devastating tragedy during our eleven o'clock hour. Back to you, Jerry.*

I just stared. That was all I could do. I had always chosen abandoned houses for a reason—no one was living in them. I never wanted to take away someone's property,

or worse someone's life, while making my art. None of my fires had ever spread either. It must have been an ambitious one.

I rushed to my computer to read the news articles about the fire. I figured there was probably more information there. I had to be certain that this was not because of me. It was in those articles that I eventually discovered that it *was* my fire. I also discovered who I had killed—a family who had recently moved to the area with three small children. I nearly fainted as I saw pictures of the destroyed apartment complex with flames leaping out of the windows, smoking rubble, crying victims, and pure annihilation.

The fact that I had killed seemed surreal. It couldn't have been true. How could I have done that? I didn't light the apartments on fire. Guilt, regret, sadness, and shame washed over me. My children had become murderers.

#

I was glued to the TV set for the next week as the news reported updates every night. They showed pictures of the family. The father, Robert Fallwell, looked like a large man from the photo of his face plastered all over the TV and the internet. His wife, Rosemary, looked beautiful with her golden brown hair. Their three children, two boys and one girl, ages five, two, and eighteen months respectively, all had their mother's hair.

There were interviews with neighbors on the local news website. "They were a lovely family. I saw the father playing with his sons almost every evening," one neighbor attested. Another neighbor told the reporter, "Rosemary was such a sweetheart. I saw her all the time taking her kids to soccer practice, taking their little ones to day care. We talked a lot when her and her husband were outside playing with the kids. Such well-behaved kids. It's really a shame."

#

Nightmares haunted me for the next four weeks. The more details I found out, the worse they became. I kept seeing images of this family burning. They were dying gruesome deaths with their skin slowly melting from their bodies in the fire. Sometimes I even saw the father running to save his children and then disappearing in the flames. Other times their faces would form in the flames, look at me, and ask “why” as their faces disappeared back into fire. I would see Rosemary’s flowing hair catching on fire as her face became engulfed in the flames. I had never dreamt of people dying before. I had never dreamt of people burning.

I sat on the edge of my bed every morning, disgusted by the matches, lighters, and accelerant strewn about my room. I shoved them all off my night stand and my dresser. Threw lighters at the wall. Filled up my kitchen sink and dunked my matchbooks into it, rendering them useless and dead. Dead like the model family I had killed.

I had to see what I had done in person. I got into my car, and saw the Zippo sitting on my center console, staring at me. I stared back. I was disgusted by its mockery of me but didn’t move it. I drove to the scene, remembering how I had felt when I drove there to light the fire. It was a mixture of excitement, happiness, and anxiety. This time, it was just the opposite. Bad adrenaline from the fear of knowing something awful was coming.

The yellow caution tape came into view, moving at the mercy of the wind. What was left of the apartment building came into view shortly after. They were in the process of tearing down the last parts of the building. The heaving machinery crowded the air with noise. It was hard to think. I parked across the street, watching the building come

down. The scorched abandoned house, my real art, remained untouched and alone across the stream.

As the walls fell, I saw bits and pieces of items that hadn't completely burned. Bed frames, refrigerators, and some TVs were still intact but mutilated by the rebellious flames. They were warped and discolored. Repulsive. Sickening. What had I done? I couldn't leave this case unsolved. They deserved justice, didn't they?

#

It was a moment I had wished would never happen. I walked into the police station. My nerves were getting the best of me, and I was shaking, subconsciously wishing I had a lighter to release the tension.

"How may I help you?" A large woman stood behind a counter.

"I, uh," I swallowed. My mouth had suddenly gone dry. How I wished I at least had a match. "I set the fires. I killed the Fallwells."

Her blank stare was a little unsettling. "One moment." She hurried away as fast as her body looked like it could hurry. She returned not too long after she left with a man in a suit. I assumed he was some kind of detective.

"Hi, I'm Detective Jordan Marbor. What's your name?"

"Luci Truelson."

"All right, Luci. Let's go back here and have a talk."

The need to light something shot into my brain, despite working so hard to give up the deadly habit, being in a police station, and turning myself in for arson. I followed the tall man back to an interrogation room. There was one wooden table with six chairs around it.

“Have a seat on that side of the table, please.” He pointed to the side facing the door.

I took the first chair I reached, and he took the chair opposite me.

“Okay, Luci. First off, is Luci your given name?”

“No. It’s Lucilla.”

“Can you spell that for me?”

“L-U-C-I-L-L-A.” His hand made violent movements as he wrote down my name with his left hand.

“And spell your last name.”

“T-R-U-E-L-S-O-N.”

“Okay. So, why did you come into the station today?” He put down his pen and rested both his arms on the table

“I set the fires. Like I told the—lady at the front.”

“Which fires?”

“The one from a month ago—where all those kids died. And the one from the night before that. And ten others before that one.

He scribbled something else down on his notepad. Looking back up at me, he said, “Let’s start with the fire at the apartment complex ‘where all those kids died,’ as you described it. What accelerant did you use?”

“Kerosene.”

“And where did you start the fire?”

“The back porch. With kerosene and matches. Then I lit the pine tree. Then I left.”

“Okay, Luci. And when did you light your first fire?”

“Ever?” I was confused by the question.

“No. You stated you had started ten fires previous to the ones you most recently started. When was the first of those ten?”

“Last year.”

“Can you give me a month?”

I couldn’t really remember what month it was. “March,” I guessed.

“Okay. You just sit tight right here, and I’ll be back in a few minutes.”

As I sat there, starting to regret my decision to turn myself in, I thought of the pictures of the family I had killed. I thought the loving mother and loving father. The happy children who would never see their potential realized. I thought of all the other families who lived in those apartments—the apartments that were no longer standing. This was what I deserved, but it was still hard to accept. I stared at the table, drawing a circle on the surface with my finger.

He returned with a stack of files. “Okay, Luci. In addition to confessing to the murders of Robert, Rosemary, Matthew, Jesse, and Emily Fallwell, you are confessing to setting fire to the following addresses.” He opened each folder and read the addresses out loud to me. I honestly couldn’t remember the first seven addresses, but they were most likely me. Even if they weren’t, I’d take the blame anyway.

After further questioning, I was taken into custody for twelve counts of felony arson and five counts of second degree murder.

#

The cold iron bars clacked shut the same way they had for the past six months during my trial. I was beginning my life sentence at some women's facility, mostly for the five second degree murder charges that my parentally-hired lawyer couldn't plea bargain out of. He did get the arson charges reduced to criminal damage to property and criminal trespass. I never burned anything with malicious intent, a key component in an arson conviction, so my lawyer was able to talk those sentences down. However, the district attorney refused to reduce the murder charges. Second degree murder charges have a minimum sentence of twenty years. The judge gave me life, understandably, since I had killed two adults and three minors.

The nightmares still came back from time to time during my first week in jail. New dreams appeared regarding my trial. Dreams that I burned down the court house both empty and with people inside of it. I would wake up in a sweat in my cell. I'd forget where I was the first few nights, which made waking up from the nightmares even worse. I began to have trouble telling my dreams apart from reality and would panic that I had actually set the court house on fire, killing even more people.

In my cell I thought through the escalation of my firesetting. I only started to burn abandoned houses because there was so much to burn. Bonfires got old by high school, and the adorable little flames of matches and lighters can only do so much. It's the art and craft of burning a house that makes it so appealing. There is no art or craft in burning flesh.

"Wanna smoke?" My cellmate whispered to me, holding out a cigarette.

My finger twitched automatically. I didn't smoke, but cigarettes needed a flame. Without thinking, I responded, "Sure."

I took the cigarette and slipped it behind my ear like they do in the movies. Considering I had never done that before, I probably looked like an idiot trying to make it stick. Perhaps my ears were too small. It didn't matter though. I held the lighter in my hand, striking the flint with the thumbwheel, just making a spark.

“There shoulda been plenty of liquid in that there lighter.”

I wasn't an idiot. There was plenty of fluid, but my thumb wouldn't stay on the lever. My fingers wouldn't work together the way they had for years to create a flame. The headlines *Pyromaniac Leaves Five Dead, Seven Injured, and Eight Families Homeless*, *Wichita Arsonist Finally Caught*, *Wichita Arson's First Victims* kept spinning around in my head. The Fallwell family, burning like in my nightmares, flashed before my eyes for a second. I flinched.

The prosecution and defense argued endlessly during my trial about my ability to comprehend the consequences of my actions. It didn't matter if I felt I was accountable for my actions or not. I had killed people. After all this time of careful, discriminate fire setting, I ruined the lives of eight families in one night.

My fingers finally ignited the butane. The fire was no longer warm and inviting—now it was angry and painful. I couldn't help it though. My finger let go of the trigger and lit the butane again. I stared at the murderous combustion. My fingers let go of the trigger again, but relit the butane once more. What were my fingers thinking? Did they not know that because of their actions a family was dead? Did they not realize they had left people homeless? Destroyed their lives? Destroyed mine?

I lit the cigarette and held it between my fingers.

“The fuck are you doing!” My cellmate screamed.

I pressed the cigarette into my skin. I had to burn the way they burned. I thought if I burnt myself every time I lit a fire, I wouldn't want to light them anymore.

Ten years later I still sneak a lighter and watch the chemicals burn.

Junk

Every time was different, but everything was the same. The smoke entered his lungs, suffocating the delicate tissue. The chemicals kissed his heart. He held his breath for a moment and then opened his mouth like a snake. Hol looked around the basement, waiting for the high to set in.

“This is some good shit, Iggy. Where’d you get this?” Tamir held a plastic tube stolen from an ink pen between his teeth.

“The magician never shares his secrets,” Iggy said as he prepared another pipe. “Though, I would trade my secrets for a chance at Hol’s sister. Wouldn’t even hesitate.”

“You really need to fucking stop talking about my sister. She’s less than half your age, asshole.” Hol sat on Iggy’s plaid couch, slowly beginning to feel each rough and scratchy thread tear at his skin. He wiggled his fingers, happy that daytime was setting in.

“You’d want her if she wasn’t blood.” Iggy was sitting at the far corner of his basement with Tamir. They usually got high in his basement, since he was thirty-five and did not live with his parents. The rest of them were twenty; well, Hol was almost twenty. He knew his mom would flip if she saw what he was doing.

Sitting next to Hol, staring off into space, was Inoke. Hol always joked that Inoke was the epitome of Samoan.

“This is some good shit.” His voice was even lower than one would expect.

Hol nodded.

“Hey, Iggy, gimme some more of that.” He showed no intention of getting up to get it himself. His three hundred pounds didn’t get off or on the couch that easily.

“Hey, big guy. This shit ain’t free. If you want more than you were given, gotta pay more. You all decided to split this.”

“Come on, man.”

“Dog, just sit with it. It’ll get there. Even for your fat ass.” Tamir got snippy all of a sudden.

“Here, have the rest of mine. I think I’m above the clouds already.” Hol passed the foil over. The texture of the couch was beginning to fade, and he couldn’t feel himself breathe anymore.

“Thanks, Holbrook, you’re the best. I don’t even know why I talk to Tamir.”

“Why do you still call me by my full name? No one does that.” Hol watched Inoke’s face as it looked around the room for something.

“I call you Holbrook because that’s your name. It’s who you are. Can I borrow your lighter, too?” Inoke pointed at the table.

“Yeah, sure.” Hol picked up his blue lighter from the table in front of the couch and leaned over to put it in Inoke’s hand. He moved the lighter along the underside of the foil, just enough to make the puddle bubble. He took a straw cut in half and held it in his mouth, inhaling the smoke produced by the bubbling substance.

Warmth moved from Hol’s lungs, to his stomach, to his neck, to his shoulder, through his arms, and through his legs. His feet felt sweaty. He looked around the basement, noticing how the wall color changed from matte to semi-gloss in random

places. The matte color was just a little bit darker than the semi-gloss, but they were close enough on the spectrum of red that it wasn't too noticeable.

“Ha, remember the first time I got you high, Hol?” Smoke seeped out of Tamir's mouth as he spoke. He wasn't holding the heroin in his lungs long enough. Visible smoke is wasted dope.

“No.” Hol was still evaluating the aesthetics of the basement.

“Get this Iggy.” Tamir squirmed in his seat. “Gave him some weed and the motherfucker nearly passed out. He got cotton mouth and everything. Pussy licker thought he was gonna die.”

“Yeah,” Hol didn't hear a word they said.

“H agrees with him more.” Inoke's head bobbed from front to back.

Hol's head fell back against the top rail of the couch. He heard the sound of his head knock against the wood and felt the shockwave the collision created, but he didn't feel any pain. He wobbled his head back and forth and then let it fall on to one side. The stairs were in his line of sight. Their stained maple wood almost blended in with the color of the wall. The piles of aluminum foil almost complemented the red, Hol thought. The charred parts added some pizzazz and the reflective nature of the foil added a nice light. The Home and Garden Network was on the TV in the background.

Time passed, and no one moved. It wasn't until early the next morning that Hol realized he was going to be in deep shit if he didn't get home soon. He left his friends asleep on the couch, floor, and table. Inoke's chin rested neatly on layers of fat, appearing almost comfortable. He hadn't moved from the space he had been occupying

the night before. Tamir was asleep on the floor, and Iggy's head was pillowed on a small table in the corner of the room.

Hol rubbed his sore neck as he went into the basement bathroom. He tried to wash his face and leave as quietly as he could. The door had to remain unlocked since the only way to lock it was with four different deadbolts, and Hol had neither the keys nor the time to worry about it.

The door to his ancient Saturn Ion creaked and popped as he opened it. He fell into his seat, stained so often he wasn't sure what the actual color was supposed to be. The car failed to start on the first try, which had been happening for almost a month, but eventually the engine turned, and Hol was able to leave Iggy's place.

As he drove out of Iggy's development, Hol noticed another house that looked just like Iggy's--four of them in total. It was a planned neighborhood where buyers could choose from five floor plans and one of ten exterior designs. Every fifth house was the same floorplan. Hol was disappointed in their lack of creativity. He remembered the land being cleared to build the neighborhood when he was just learning how to ride his bike. Iggy had moved there last year.

Hol sat at the gate to the neighborhood, waiting impatiently for it to open. He weaved his car through the gate, just barely clipping his side view mirror. He didn't care—he *couldn't* care—he had to get the fuck home before his dad got up.

#

“Good morning, son.”

Hol was too late. His father was standing in the kitchen pouring his morning shot of Bailey's into a mug of coffee. He didn't have his work uniform on yet, which was

strange. He usually got ready for work and *then* drank. The coffee was the last thing he did before going to work.

“Hi, Dad.” Hol looked at the ground and tried to squeeze past his dad to get to his room.

“Isn’t today a Monday?” He stirred his coffee and Bailey’s, slowly, ominously.

“Yeah.” Hol stopped as he reached the archway that separated the rest of the house from the bedrooms.

“What time is it now?”

“Uh,” Hol nervously took out his phone to check the time. “It’s six twenty-two.”

“Is it now? And when do you go to school, Son?” Hol’s father slurped from his *World’s Greatest Dad* mug. Hol wished he could have told his four year old self that his father definitely did not qualify for such a distinction.

“Seven thirty.”

“So how many hours does that leave you to sleep?”

“Less than an hour.”

“Ah, well, better get to it then.”

Hol’s dad plopped his coffee mug on the counter, three quarters of the way empty, and stormed passed Hol, shoving him into the archway as he passed.

Hol waited until his dad left before he attempted to go to sleep. He decided he was going to be late that day and not give a fuck what his dad thought. As he lay in bed with his eyes closed, becoming more and more pissed as he replayed the conversation with his dad over and over again, he heard his sister’s alarm in the neighboring room go off. Shortly after, her quick steps made a run for the kitchen. He heard the cereal pour,

the fridge open, the milk pour, the fridge close, the drawer open, the shuffling silverware, and the quick footsteps run back to the room. The rhythm lulled him to sleep.

Hol ended up missing school that day. He woke up at three, panicked because his dad would be home any minute, and he looked like he had slept all day. Even worse, he felt like complete and utter shit. His head ached, his body ached, his nose was runny, and he could have sworn that he was shaking a little. It didn't matter though—he'd be feeling even worse if his dad found out he had skipped school. His shower lasted all of four minutes, which only included brushing his teeth and rinsing off without soap. He stole his mom's blow drier from his parent's bathroom and tried to figure out the quickest way to dry his hair. It would have been too obvious if he left it wet since he usually got home only a few minutes before his dad. He heard the garage door open, threw the blow drier back in his parent's bathroom, put on the first shirt and pants he could find, picked up his backpack, and started staging the living room for his dad to come in: He put shoes next to the door, the backpack next to the couch, turned the TV on, and tried to look exhausted.

Just as Hol had his 'working hard all day' look down, his father walked into the house. "Is your mother home yet?"

"Nah, she isn't. Wasn't she taking Frankie to dance practice after school?"

"Does she know you didn't go to school today?"

"What the fuck do you mean I didn't go to school today?"

"My first clue was the message left on house phone. I stopped at home for my lunch break. The message said that you were marked absent at school today. I thought that odd so I went to see if you were in your room. And there you were. Passed out like a motherfucker."

“By *lunch break*, do you mean *drink break*?” Hol knew his dad came home during his lunch hour to throw back a couple of shots. When he was younger and just starting to realize what his dad was doing, Hol would check the level of all of the alcohol bottles stashed in the pantry before he went to school and would then measure each of the bottles again when he got home from school. There was always a discrepancy. This habit lasted until his freshman year of high school when he gave up on trying to monitor his dad.

“Once you get a job, kid, where all you do is listen to other people complain about their fucking job and beg you for a raise or ask for time off the day before or call in sick every two weeks, and you have a level of production you have to maintain or get fired, you’ll understand why.”

Hol ran past his dad and slammed the front door behind him, ignoring the yells and profanity that followed. He got into his car and went to Inoke’s.

#

“I’m sorry your dad’s such a shithead.” Inoke never answered the door with a normal salutation.

Hol simply shook his head and took off his shoes just inside of the front door.

“You can leave your shoes on. It’s not your house.” Inoke’s whole body bounced a little as he laughed

“Yeah, I know. Just habit.”

“Just so you know, my mom’s here, so, you know, small talk.”

“I got it.” There was to be no discussion of Iggy, the night before, or drugs.

“So, what happened this time?” Inoke took a seat on the giant leather couch located in his living room. He propped his feet up on the ottoman and folded his hands over his gut.

“When did you get home yesterday?”

“Hey, man, I said quiet.” Inoke’s legs moved off the ottoman faster than Hol had ever seen them move before.

“God damn it. How was your morning, Inoke?” His voice was exaggerated.

“Chill.” His massive legs returned to their position on the ottoman.

“I got up early and saw my dad before he went to work.” They began sorting out a code-talk system as the conversation continued.

I got caught by my dad coming home from Iggy’s.

“My mom was at work when I got my breakfast.”

I didn’t get home until way late. Didn’t get caught.

“I saw Tamir on my way to school this morning. Have you talked to him lately?”

How’s Tamir?

“Yeah, I saw him a couple of days ago. Did your dad cook breakfast?”

I left before Tamir woke up. Now, seriously, what did your dad say to you?

“Green eggs and ham.”

A bunch of bullshit.

“He didn’t burn the bacon this time, did he?”

He didn’t smack the shit out of you again, did he?

“It was crispy, but not burned.”

No.

“My mom’s cooking some meatloaf tonight. Want to stay for dinner?”

My mom’s cooking meatloaf for dinner. You can stay here if you want.

“Yeah, sure.”

Thank you.

#

Hol went to school without a hitch for the next few days despite having the super flu. His head was constantly throbbing and his shakes were getting worse, so he just stayed in bed, out of sight, as much as he could. He only left his room to go to school and when he heard the sound of his sister’s footsteps venture out to the kitchen. She always seemed to know when the best times were to be up and around the house.

“Hello, big brother.” Frankie handed him the jug of milk.

“Hello, small sister.” Hol took the jug and put it back in the fridge.

“Mom has the day off of work today, so she said she’ll take me to look at this pottery class at some school.” She spoke so fast Hol had a hard time understand what she was saying. All he heard was “mom,” “day off,” and “pottery.”

“Wait, Mom has the day off?”

“Yup she does. And dad’ll be gone all day. Mom already called school to tell them I won’t be there. I don’t like school anyway. Except art class. I really like art class. Did you see the portrait I made of you? I put it on the fridge yesterday.”

“You did?” Hol felt bad. He would have seen it if he hadn’t gotten high yesterday. He looked around the front of the fridge, and then peered over to the side. His impressionist reflection smiled back at him.

“I made you smile in the picture because you never smile. Sorry I couldn’t get all the details right. Pastels really aren’t good for detail, but they make a mess, and it’s really fun.”

“You’re going places!” Hol rubbed his sister’s head before getting ready to leave for school.

He passed his mom in the hallway as he went to find his backpack. “Have a good day at school!” she said to him. Hol wanted to know why he couldn’t skip school and go find cool things to do. It was always his sister who got the special treatment from their mom. His dad treated everyone as equal pieces of shit.

Hol left the house shortly before his mom and his sister and began walking. His high school was only a mile away, and walking was cheaper than paying for gas in his clunker. The sky looked threatening, and the air smelled like rain. Hol prayed that any precipitation would hold out until he got to school. He began walking faster, trying to shield his face from the leaves that were blowing off the trees.

The school was in his sight, just beyond a neatly trimmed hedge. He tried to walk even faster while doing his best to avoid running. He didn’t want to look like a complete moron running to school. He heard a car honk as he gave up and broke into a slow jog.

“Yo, Hol!” Tamir was hanging half way out of Iggy’s Hummer. “Yo, bro! Get in the car before you get soaked and have to stay in school smelling and looking like shit.”

Hol’s initial reaction was to jump right in, but his brain quickly reminded him of his father—how he was not in any mood to piss him off twice in one week. “Nah, guys. I can’t. I gotta go to school.”

“Fuck school. We’re going into Portland to get some smack. Iggy found some China white from this guy down there.”

“Yeah!” Iggy called over from the driver’s seat.

“By the way, you really do look like shit. You miss it, don’t you? Always in a matter of days you’re wanting more. What a little trooper.”

“Dude, why the fuck are you yelling this out of a fucking car in the god damn suburbs?” Hol turned to walk away. “Maybe I’ll be over tonight,” he called back as he continued his walk to school.

In his first period class he got a text from Inoke, *I didnt say anything about ur dad. R u coming to Tamir’s after school?*

I’ll try. Hol replied.

In fifth period, Hol was called down to the office. A short, sweet, annoying secretary relayed a message to him.

“Holbrook O’Brien?”

“Yes?”

“We got a call from your mother saying that you have a family emergency. She said to call her once we let you leave.”

“Family emergency?” Hol was almost hoping his dad had finally gotten his third DUI.

“She didn’t say. Just that you need to call her. There’s some tiny handwriting on this note, though.” She chuckled and showed the face of the yellow Post-it Note to Hol. He didn’t get why the handwriting mattered.

“We just need you to sign this early out form so that we don’t mark you as absent for the rest of the day and avoid any bad marks on your record. Mokay?”

After that formality was over with, and he could finally escape the deranged secretary, Hol called his mom.

“Sweetie? Are you there?” She answered the phone in a panic.

“Yes, Mom.”

“Honey, your father was in a little accident. I need to go meet him at the police station and find out what exactly happened. I’m dropping Frankie off at the house before I go. I need you to stay home tonight. I’ll call later tonight to let you guys know what’s going on.”

Hol could hear his sister’s faint voice in the background pleading, “Mom, I’m fifteen! Just tell me what happened to dad, Mom. Is he in trouble or something? Why can’t I go see him too?”

He didn’t even try to argue. “Yeah, I’ll hurry home.”

“Okay, love you!”

“Bye, Mom.”

Frankie’s voice was still whining in the background as he hung up the phone.

#

Hol’s mom rushed into the house with Frankie following not far behind. “Hi, Hol. I’ll be back later tonight. Please don’t go anywhere.”

“Sure, Mom. Can you tell me what happened first?”

She leaned in next to his ear. “He hit someone. He was drunk.” She whispered.

“Don’t tell your sister.”

Hol's mom kissed both her children on their foreheads before grabbing her checkbook and running out the door.

"What did Mom mean by 'a little accident?'" Frankie stood in the kitchen turning her gaze from the front door to Hol.

"Dunno," Hol replied.

"I'll be in my room."

#

Hey guys, my dad's in jail again. I'm up for chasing the dragon tonight.

Iggy was the first to respond, knew u'd be wantin it.

Tamir told everyone to meet up at his house in an hour, and Inoke replied that he'd be there as well.

"Frankie!" Hol called down the hallway.

"Yes?" Her frizzy-haired head peeped out the door way.

"I'm going out. Don't tell Mom if she gets back. Tell her I went to get food or something."

Her body came through the doorway and balanced the weight on one foot. Her arms crossed. "Are you going to go get high, Hol?"

"What?" Hol stared at his sister, hoping she had no concrete evidence to base this question off of.

"We're learning about drugs in health class. They talked about how if someone you know is disappearing a few days at time or stays out late or does bad in school, they're probably drinking or smoking pot."

“Well, you don’t have to worry about the alcohol or weed. I’m just going to hang out with Inoke.” Technically, Hol wasn’t lying.

“But we haven’t heard back from Mom yet about what happened to Dad!” Her arms uncrossed and shot straight to her sides.

Hol had forgotten that she didn’t know. He was tired of having to cover for his parents. “He got in a drunk driving accident. You know how you talk about alcohol in health class? Well, Dad got plastered, like you know he does, decided to drive home or wherever the bastard was going, and ran the fuck into someone. Which means, he’s in jail right now, Mom’s gonna try and bail him out, he’ll come home and drink more, and then go to jail.”

“Dad’s going to jail?” Her face was a mix between shock and anger.

“You don’t remember the last time he went?”

“No.”

“He got his second DUI seven or eight years ago. He didn’t do much time. He fudged his way out of that. I think Mom told you he was on a business trip or something, and you didn’t think anything of it.”

Frankie was speechless. Hol knew that she wasn’t an idiot. He figured she just chose to ignore everything that was glaringly wrong with their dad.

He shrugged his shoulders, and Frankie went back into her room, slamming the door on her way.

He was itching even more for the high.

#

Tamir lived with his older brother in an apartment not too far from Iggy's place. It wasn't the nicest apartment complex around, but it wasn't the worst, either. Hol climbed up the wooden stairs, instinctively checking behind him to make sure that he wasn't going to get mugged and that there were no cops on the premises. They'd had to scrap a couple of get-togethers at Tamir's place because the cops had been called to another apartment, and they didn't want the pigs to go around asking questions and walking their way into a heroin bust.

"Come on in! Heard you walking up the steps. What took you so long?"

"What are you talking about? I'm not late."

"Everyone else is here." Tamir opened the door even wider. Iggy waved hello.

"Yeah, yeah, whatever." Hol walked into the apartment. It hadn't been cleaned since the last time he was there. He wondered how they ate with all their dishes in the sink and on the counter. He kept his shoes on.

Iggy took out a small, orange balloon and tossed it onto the table. Tamir picked it up and examined it. "No need to hurry on this one, guys. My brother's out for the week." A smile stretched across his face. It didn't look like a smile of happy—it looked like a smile of crazy. He got up and handed the balloon to Inoke, who shook it, pretending to inspect the contents without taking them out of the container.

"Where you goin', kid?" Iggy called to his cohort.

"What do you mean? I'm getting the foil." Tamir looked confused.

"Nah. We ain't using that."

Hol stared at Iggy, hoping he didn't mean snorting the powder.

Iggy didn't suggest snorting the drug. Instead, he pulled out a needle and syringe stored in a zip-lock baggie. "We're gonna take it the real way."

Tamir and Iggy were the only ones in the room who looked excited. Hol was unsure about the idea, but Inoke looked livid.

"That's not a good idea. Why can't we just stick to smoking it?" Inoke's large hands gesticulated as he spoke.

"Because, Flubber, this is better. Why bother with scag if you're not gonna do it right?" Iggy took the needle and syringe from the baggie and connected the two parts together. He placed them gently on the table and picked up the balloon.

"Come on, guys," Tamir turned to Hol and Inoke. "This is gonna be the fucking shit."

Hol didn't say anything. He just stared at Iggy mixing some of the dope with little bit of water. The powder slowly disappeared.

"I'm not sticking a needle in my arm." Inoke sounded pissed.

"Just try it once, bro."

"Don't call me 'bro,' Tamir." Inoke sounded even more pissed.

"Whatever." Tamir joined Hol in a mesmerized state watching Iggy perform his ritual in preparing the heroin.

"Now, this shit's pure, but just in case, you're gonna wanna cook it a lil'." Iggy tilted a spoon he extracted from his pocket into the larger pool of dissolved heroin. He lifted up about half a spoonful of the liquid and held flame under the dirty spoon. "This will get you higher than you ever thought possible. Trust me. I'm gonna give you all wings." He held the tip of the needle in the small pool of clear liquid once it had cooled

off and pushed the plunger up with his thumb. “Here, Tamir, you can be the first to do up.”

Tamir looked uncertain as he took the syringe from Iggy’s yellow-stained hands. He had already tied a belt around his bicep.

“So you just hold it at your elbow right there, like the doctor does when he takes blood.”

Tamir followed Iggy’s instructions and put the tip of the needle at a vein popping up from the inside of his elbow.

“Well, what’re you waiting for? Push it on in there, pull it back a little to make sure you go a vein, and pull the trigger.” Iggy seemed too eager to watch Tamir inject the liquid into his bloodstream.

Tamir closed his eyes and pushed the small metal tube into the vein and pressed the plunger to the bottom of the syringe. He quickly pulled the needle out and handed it back to Iggy.

“Give it a couple seconds. You’ll feel it coming.”

Hol watched anxiously as Tamir blinked his eyes a couple of times and then threw up all over his couch. The guys moved as quickly as they could away from the projectile stomach acid and partially digested food.

“Fuck, dude. What the fuck was that?” Hol checked his clothes for any liquid that might have found its way over to him.

“Not a big deal. Maybe a little too much.”

“What do you mean a little too much?” Inoke spoke as if he was reprimanding Iggy for the incorrect dosage.

“It happens. He’ll be fine. He’ll feel as happy as ever in a few minutes.”

Iggy took a little more of the liquid, about three quarters of the spoon, and heated it up the same way he had for Tamir. He took the same syringe, wiped off the needle with his shirt, and dipped it into the heroin, drawing more than he had for Tamir. He too tightened a belt around his bicep and then held both his arms out while balancing the syringe between his fingers. Scabbed needle marks dotted the inside of his elbow. It reminded Hol of the chicken pox scabs he had as a kid. He watched as Iggy found a clean piece of skin and shoved the needle into it. The skin first dented where the needle was pressed, but then gave way to the pointed piece of metal.

“Oh yeah. That’s it. Woo.” Iggy slowly pulled the needle from his vein and put it down on the end table next to the chair. He leaned back, inhaling slowly and exhaling slowly. “Your turn, Hol.”

“Let’s just get out of here.” Inoke shook his head as he struggled to push himself up off the bench he had been sitting on.

“What?” Hol looked up at Inoke’s angry face.

“I ain’t doing that shit. I’m not a fucking junkie. And neither are you, Hol.”

Iggy sat forward, resting his elbows on his knees. “Hol. I know you. You love this shit. Why give it up now?”

“He doesn’t know you. He just wants your money.”

“Now ain’t that bullshit.” Iggy returned to his original position, slouched down with his shoulders and head leaning on the back of the chair.

Hol sat on the floor, watching the debate go on between Iggy and Inoke about what he wanted—about who knew him better. He stared at the syringe on the table,

partly wanting to try and partly wanting to leave with Inoke. He saw the spoon and the lighter and the small bowl with some dissolved smack still waiting to be used.

“Come on, Hol.” Inoke tugged on Hol’s arm.

“Let go, man.” Hol’s body craved the drug. His brain kept telling him to stay; it kept telling him to pick up the spoon, suck up a dose, and inject it into his blood stream. His muscles wanted the relief. His body wanted the drug.

“The fuck you talking about?” Inoke’s voice grew louder each time he spoke.

“I don’t wanna leave.”

“Are you shitting me right now?”

Hol finally broke free from Inoke’s grip. Iggy smiled as Hol turned toward him. His eyebrows rose in approval of Hol’s actions.

“The fuck, man. Don’t do this. You’re never coming back from that. You’re going to get Hepatitis E or whatever you get from sharing needles. You’re gonna turn into Iggy. Fuck that shit.”

“Whoa big boy. No need for name calling.” Iggy’s eyes were closed. His head rested against the wing of the chair.

“Fuck. Look at Tamir.” Inoke pointed at Tamir’s limp body flopped over the arm of the couch.

“I’ll just take less than him. You can go if you want. Whatever. I’m gonna stay. I don’t wanna miss out on this.” Hol leaned in closer to Inoke. “What if it’s fucking *amazing*,” he whispered.

Inoke leaned down, putting his face almost level with Hol’s. “What if you’re a fucking dick sucker that chooses dope over his own best friend?” he whispered back. He

stood up straight and walked out Tamir's front door, slamming it after he met Hol's eyes on last time. The apartment shook a little as Inoke stormed down the wooden stairs.

"I'm surprised those stairs don't just break under him." Iggy's eyes opened a little, but quickly closed again.

"Earthquake, bro." Tamir's faint voice just barely joined the conversation and then dropped out again.

Hol walked over to the table next to Iggy.

"I'm proud of you, kid. Sticking up to that giant like that," Iggy said, his eyes still closed.

Hol picked up the spoon and sat next to the coffee table. He placed the spoon on the glass surface and shook some more of the powder from the balloon into the bowl. He added a little more water from the Dasani bottle sitting on the floor. He stirred, watching the powder disappear into the clear liquid again. The spoon gathered up the water and drug as Hol dipped it into the glass bowl. He picked up the lighter and imitated the way he had seen Iggy heat up the mixture. As he grabbed the syringe to wipe off the needle, he remembered he hadn't tied off the blood flow. He did his best to hold the spoon steady while removing the belt from Tamir's arm. Hol carefully sat back down on the floor, held the end of the belt with his teeth, and threaded his arm through the loop. Still pulling with his teeth, he wriggled the belt up to just above his elbow.

Hol began to cut the blood flow from his arm, making it difficult for him to draw the heroin into the syringe. "Fuck." He dropped the syringe after getting half of the puddle into it. He placed the spoon down on the table, careful not to spill any of the

remaining liquid. He reached down, picked up the syringe, blew on the needle, and held the tip against his skin.

“Nice and easy,” Hol heard Iggy whisper in his half-conscious state.

He took a deep breath in, pulling the air in around the belt. He watched the needle press into his skin. Hol attempted to follow the vein in his arm as well as he could, but he missed it on the first attempt. He lined the needle up again and pushed. He pulled the tip back a little, double checking to make sure that he was in a vein this time. He was. Slowly pressing the plunger, Hol watched the liquid seep from its container out into his blood stream. Once it was gone, he dragged the needle from his skin and placed the syringe on the table. The heat rushed through his body faster than it ever had before. His elbows fell onto the table. He forgot about Inoke with his first breath. He forgot about his dad with his second breath. He couldn't feel anything by his third breath. As his breathing continued to slow, Hol propped his head up on his hands and let the belt fall from his arm.

Plunge

The right side of my right hand is covered in graphite. I drew a sketch of my foot, a sketch of my desk lamp, and tried to copy the pattern on my comforter. I also wrote four or five pages of some poetry mixed with a little bit of prose. It's not enough to calm my thoughts, though. I need to take a walk. There's still sunlight out. The city's not so bad when there's sun—I guess. It doesn't matter though. My legs are begging to move, and my body is pleading for me to help get the energy out. My apartment is suffocating, and I just want to get the hell out of here.

The spring breeze feels good on my face. I like the way the wind plays with my hair. It's like it's flirting with me. It moves the strands in front of my face, off to the sides, and straight back as it chooses. I wish I could be the wind sometimes. I could go anywhere I wanted to and do whatever I wanted to. Well, maybe not the second part.

The buildings I walk by range from dilapidated to costing over a million dollars. I'm a little jealous of the nice townhomes with their vibrant colors, well maintained potted plants, and elaborate garage doors. The fancy restaurants release a fantastic odor. The not-so-fancy restaurants just smell like grease.

I look at the face of everyone who walks by me. Some are happy, like me! Others look like their dog is missing, and some even look like their dog was run over by a car, or shot, or something horrific. The couples hold hands and walk with synchronized steps. Except that couple—he's about seven feet tall, and she's about four and a half feet tall. It seems like an odd pairing.

Don't step on the crack or you'll fall and break your back. Or was it, *don't step on the crack or you'll break your mother's back?* I can't remember now. I'm sure either way is acceptable. But not like the toe-may-toe versus toe-mah-toe debate. No one ever says toe-mah-toe unless they're British. Stupid tomatoes.

I don't like pigeons much. They look so awkward when they fly. Their cooing is also annoying. I see one missing a couple toes. I wonder what could have caused that. It almost depresses me that the little guy is hobbling around, but nothing could get me down right now.

I do have an exam on Wednesday. Damn. Eastern Philosophies, or something like that, that I don't particularly care for. It'll be a short answer and essay test. This professor is a total jerk. My hand cannot write that much in such a short amount of time. I'm going to get non-keyboard-induced carpal tunnel. Then I'll have hands like a Disney villain! No one wants the hands of a Disney villain! Or any Disney character for that matter, given they are animations after all.

My legs keep moving, picking up their pace for no reason other than to move faster. Walking fast is fun. It gets the heart pumping, gets you places faster, and makes you feel good. Everyone likes to feel good. I feel good. Better than good. Fucking spectacular!

It's gotten dark, and the streetlights are my only source of illumination now. It got dark a long time ago, actually. It's also getting a little chilly. I didn't plan to be out this late, and the cold night air is sinking in fast. The clear skies are probably to blame for that. I try to rub my arm to generate some heat, but it doesn't work very well. I don't

want to go back home despite the cold. I'm not ready to go inside, and I'm definitely not ready to sleep.

Crossing the street becomes an adventure at some intersections. At night, everything's hard to see, and I'm not wearing reflective clothing. I'm not really wearing anything that would help a driver see me—black yoga pants, dark blue flip flops, and a blue t-shirt. I should have worn yellow or bright pink.

I pull out my phone to find out where exactly I am. Turns out I'm about ten miles away from home. A little bit less, but close enough. Looking at the map, I realize I'm only three blocks away from Brad's place. I wonder if he's awake. Probably not. It's 1:37 in the morning. Oh well. What guy doesn't like waking up to a call for sex? Definitely not Brad.

"You awake?" I cover the mouth piece of the phone, trying to block interference from the wind. It's picked up a bit since the night fell.

"What?"

Maybe it didn't work. "Are you awake?"

"I am now."

"Okay, I'm right by your house."

"What?"

"I'm on a walk, and I happen to be by your place."

His voice suddenly becomes awake. "Aurora. You walked from your house? That's like, ten miles. Why are you walking so far at, fuck what time is it, two in the morning?"

“Just felt like it. Do you want me to come over or not, silly? It’s cold out here. You don’t want to leave a poor, helpless, freezing girl outside in the chilly night air, do you? In peril of being snatched up by scary men with mustaches.” I stop in front of his quaint little yellow townhouse, looking up at his bedroom window.

I hear him chuckle. “Yeah, let me at least put some pants on to open the door.”

“Oh, there’ll be no need for that.”

“I know.” I can almost see his perfect, white smile as he says that.

I see the light turn on behind his bedroom window and then the light come on in the living room. “Hi!” I say as he opens the door.

“Hey.” He pulls me in for a hug. His warm, bare skin against my face feels good after braving the great outdoors for so long.

“It’s cold out there. Get in before I freeze.”

I’m jealous of his hardwood floors and tasteful wallpaper. I’m not sure when he bought this place, but it always looks like he just recently moved in. There is at least one large cardboard box in every room. The one in the living room has books in it. I haven’t looked inside the others.

I skip to his kitchen and take out a bottle of water. Walking ten miles can be a little dehydrating.

“So what have *you* been up to tonight?” I hop up onto a counter and swing my legs.

“Apparently not as much as you.” He moves towards me, standing between my legs and leaning on his arms placed parallel to my sides.

I take another sip of water. “It’s not that much really. Though, I was fairly worried that you would not be awake, and I would have to keep walking. I was getting a bit thirsty. I should have remembered to bring water or Gatorade or something with me. I always forget.”

“You’re way too hyper right now.” He shakes his head.

“I’m sorry.” I slump over on the counter, inadvertently hitting his shoulder with my head. “Ow.”

He laughs at me. “Watch what you’re doing there.” He lifts my chin up and presses his lips against mine.

I wrap my arms around his neck and scoot forward on the counter to get as close to him as possible. My lungs breathe in his air, my nose takes in his scent, and my fingers savor his smooth skin. I slide off the counter, grab a hand full of his sweatpants, and lead him up the bare wood stairs to his room.

The tall lamp in the corner provides the only light in the room. It’s a boring lamp—gray with a plain frosted glass cone at the top. I go to turn the light off, but he grabs my hand and gently pulls me onto his bed. His fingertips slowly drag against my skin as he lifts my shirt off. I lean back, removing the rest of my clothes as fast as I can and tossing them to the floor. His kisses draw a line down my chest to my stomach as his sweatpants fall to the ground.

My heart races as his body moves with mine. The best feeling in the world surges through me as our breaths become faster and deeper. Dirty phrases swim through the air and tickle our ears. I run my hands through his shaggy hair, gripping it as I scream.

Life. Is. Awesome.

#

I stand here, smoking a cigarette, waiting for someone to come and fix my sink. Some pipe somewhere decided it didn't like the pipe it was connected to and broke away or exploded or something, and now I have no water pressure and a lake has formed in my kitchen. The still, dirty water is like my life—stagnant.

I light a second cigarette, watching the water seep into the cracks in the linoleum. It's going to start peeling, and I doubt my landlord's going to do anything about it. Maybe it's time to move. I only have two months left in my lease, and there's no need to renew. Thankfully I don't have too much stuff to move. Most of it is still at my mom's house in Washington.

“Looks like you have a bit of a flooding problem here, ma'am.” The stereotypical plumber arrives at my apartment. Old, fat, and sporting a gray beard. Part of me was hoping some dashing young apprentice of a plumber would come striding in here with one of those giant wrenches over his shoulder. I need to stop being so optimistic. I also need to stop watching Lifetime movies. I hate Lifetime.

“Ya think?” I replied dryly.

“I'll, uh, I'll get to work then.”

I manage a smile as he turns away from me. I return to my cigarette and lean against the railing lining the ground floor apartments. Perhaps at one point it acted as a nice decoration, but now it's just constantly in the way. The sound of crying babies echoes through the complex. What on earth did I do to get here?

I pop my hip against the railing and push myself into motion, heading back into my apartment. The plumber is on the phone, talking to someone about access panels. I

walk through the lake on my kitchen floor and slowly move my damp feet toward my bedroom. I close my door, extinguish my cigarette, and fall face first onto my bed. I pull the blankets over my back, enveloping myself in a 400 thread count cotton burrito.

The clock's display counts up to fifty-nine, then back to zero, then back up to fifty-nine, and back down to zero in big, bright, red numbers. It's the only thing I can focus on right now. I have no particular urge to do anything, but I'm still bothered by the boredom setting in. Counting, at least, is *something* to do.

"We're all set here ma'am." The plumber pokes his head just slightly into my room. My personal space has been violated. "I need you to sign this repair form."

"Sure." I reluctantly leave the comfort of my bed and the warmth of my blankets to sign his stupid sheet of paper, but I quickly return after scribbling something that does not look at all like my signature.

Darkness begins to creep into my room as I rest on my stomach under five blankets, but I have no motivation to get up and turn on a light. I drift in and out of sleep; I drift in and out of rapid fire thoughts and rapid fire dreams. I sometimes pretend my thoughts are like hummingbirds. Each little hummingbird is made out of the electric pulses that fly through my brain. They come and go quickly. They never land. They never stop. It makes the never ending noise inside my head a little less awful. Only a little, though.

The next morning a frantic knock on my door awakens me. I brush it off at first, but the knocking keeps going. I push myself out of bed, pissed that I'm forced to leave its loving embrace once again.

I look through the peephole. It's Ashley. Why is she here? I open the door a smidge. "Hey, what are you doing here?"

"Sweetie, you haven't shown up to our bio class in two weeks. Are you okay? Do you have the flu or something?"

"Oh, has it been that long?" It's a dumb class anyway. I don't need to go.

"Can I come in for a second?"

I don't want to say yes, but I'm kind of trapped. "Sure. Watch out for the shitty floor in the kitchen. There was a flood."

She walks through the doorway and stops. "Aurora. Your kitchen is a fucking mess."

"Yeah, I know." I shuffle to my couch and lay down. "So what have I missed so far?"

"You're scaring me. Really. I mean, you missed a couple classes freshman year and didn't leave your dorm all of spring break, but we were all stressed, so that didn't worry me. But this? Hon, it doesn't look like you've showered in a long time."

"I showered yesterday," I lie. It has been a while, now that I think about it.

"Has your mom called you yet? Did you try and call your mom? I know you guys don't talk much since she got remarried, but she should know what's going on."

"She doesn't need to know, Ash. I'm fine. Just really tired. That's all." I close my eyes as my head rests on the scratchy throw pillow.

"Eating something might help." I hear her sit on the coffee table in front of me.

"No." I keep my eyes closed.

“Seriously. Do you have anything I can cook for you? Eggs? Maybe a sandwich?”

“Knock yourself out.”

I can tell she’s wearing flats by the way her feet land on the peeling linoleum—showing off her ability to do the things I can’t. Rub it in, Ashley. Just rub it in how easy it is for you to cook shit. I haven’t touched anything edible in a couple of days. My stomach has stopped hurting, but I still have no desire to eat.

“Your bread is all moldy.”

“My bad.” I turn over and rest my chin on the arm of the couch to watch Ashley play the part of my caretaker. She opens each cabinet as if she’s never been here before, humming happily. Bitch. If I wanted help, I would have asked for help. I may not be able to get my butt out of bed to feed myself, but I don’t need anyone else coming in here and treating me like some infant. I feel shitty enough without having some happy person with a splendid life barge in and start cooking me macaroni and cheese.

Ashley empties the noodles from the blue box and goes to throw it away. “Where do you keep your trash bags?”

“Why?” Making eye contact feels weird.

“Your trash is overflowing, and to be honest, smells like ass.”

“Just keep playing Memory with my kitchen. I’m sure you’ll find them eventually.” I curl my head down and return to a fetal position.

“What?”

“In the pantry!” Frustration begins to seep into my words.

“Okay, okay. I’m just trying to help.”

She isn't, though. She isn't helping at all. Staying in bed all day is a lot easier to do when there's no one else around. And that's what I want to do. I can't drift off into a pleasant, painless sleep with Ashley making a ton of racket trying to cook me something.

"Almost ready. Do you want something to drink?" She sounds like my mother when I was younger.

"Water's fine."

"Like, tap water?" I figure she's staring at my floor wondering whether she needs to boil the water before letting me drink it.

"Whatever. It doesn't matter."

The fridge opens, and the bottles located in the door clank together. I'm not sure what she'll find in there. Some sort of plastic container lands on the counter.

"Okay, girly. I have some delicious Kraft macaroni and cheese for you." The spoon knocks against the edge of the bowl as she puts it on the table in front of me. "And then this lovely bottle of Vitamin Water—luckily you have this peach and mango concoction named 'endurance' because heaven knows you need some right now. It'll give you the energy to get up! Come back to class! And stop sleeping on your kinda gross looking couch!"

Dear God, please make her stop. "Excellent. I'll do my best to take this water and transform its effective advertising into a miraculous cure for my wanting to be left the fuck alone."

"Okay." She sighs. I open my eyes enough to see a frown form on her round face. "Do I need to call someone, Aurora?"

“Like who? My mom?” There goes my frustration again—ruining friendships one syllable at a time.

“No. I mean, like, the cops or something.”

“Why would you do that?”

“Because,” she puts her hand on my shoulder. “I don’t want anything to happen to you.”

“I’m fine. Don’t call the cops. That’ll be a waste of their time, and it’ll just make me really mad at you.” I somehow manage to lift my head up off the throw pillow enough to eat a spoonful of macaroni.

“I heard you hooked up with Ricky at that party a couple weeks ago.”

“So?” I chew the macaroni, shoving another spoonful in my mouth.

“So, I thought you and Brad had a thing.”

“We still do.” How on Earth is any of this relevant? I try eating the mac and cheese faster, hoping she’ll leave when the bowl is empty.

“Have you talked to either of them lately?”

“Does it look like I have?” Clearly, gossip has not been my top priority. I try to empty the bowl even faster now. It’s the first goal I’ve had in weeks. It’s a pretty pathetic goal. The mac and cheese doesn’t really taste like mac and cheese. The consistency is still there, but the flavor is pretty disappointing. It’s not the milky, cheesy deliciousness it should be. Instead it’s just mushy, orangey, goop with noodles.

“You can still talk to people. You just text them. You can even do it from your bed!”

“Yep.” The bowl is empty.

“Well, there’s some left overs I put in the fridge if you get hungry later or tomorrow or whenever.”

“Cool.”

“Aurora. Promise me you won’t do anything stupid.”

“Girl Scout’s honor.” I attempt to make the Girl Scout salute, but my body strikes down that idea.

“Please lock the door behind me. I don’t want any crazies breaking into your apartment.”

“Right on.” I close my eyes again and wait to hear her footsteps move away from me and the door click shut.

I stay on the couch, as uncomfortable as it is, and contemplate calling my mom. Nope. That didn’t need much thought. She doesn’t need to be invited to her estranged daughter’s pity party. She has her new husband to worry about and a new house and whatever else she’s up to nowadays.

The comfort of my bed calls me back. I float in and out of sleep again as the hummingbirds return. Nothing is wrong with me, no matter what anyone tries to tell me. I’m just tired and don’t want to do anything. Everyone gets like that sometimes.

I hear the chime on my phone go off. The screen lights up my room, but I don’t move my head to look. Now isn’t really a good time to talk.

I notice the notebooks on and around my desk in the dim light. Notebooks filled with pencil scribbled notes about the dreams I had in the two hours of sleep I got every night; pages covered in words of short stories, poems, novel chapters, and diary entries. I’m not sure what happened, but I haven’t touched them in weeks. They just stand at

attention, waiting to be used again. The thoughts that fill those notebooks are gone. I'm not sure where they went.

The chime of my phone goes off again. I tilt my head toward the device this time, lean over toward the nightstand, and squint my eyes to see who's texting. I should have known Brad would text me at a time like this. It's not a welcome sight, but there isn't much room for my mood to decline. He always seems to know when it's a bad time for him to text me and takes that subconscious knowledge and uses it against me. I haven't texted him in three weeks for a reason.

I reply with a short *yes* to the question of whether or not I am still awake.

I reply with a short *sure* to the question of whether or not I want to come over.

As I get ready to leave, I wonder why I am even trying. I don't really want to go see him tonight. I don't really want to do anything tonight, and it's already 10pm. I stare at myself in the mirror, asking why. The only answer I can come up with is that I want to feel something other than complete and utter despair.

I also notice that I look like shit and take a quick shower. It doesn't help much.

#

"Hey," he welcomes me at the door.

"Hi." I take my jacket off and leave it on the floor by my shoes.

"Want a drink?"

"Of course." I reply with a smile. Why didn't I think of that earlier?

After a few drinks consisting of eighty percent bourbon, ten percent soda, and ten percent ice, a discussion of my flooded apartment, and an episode of *The Big Bang Theory*, our night continues as it always does—shirts off, pants off. I wish I could have

had more to drink, though. It isn't the most spectacular time I've had with him. His breathing is annoying to me now. His sweat grosses me out. I begin to lose feeling where before pleasure had surged through my body. I try pulling him in closer, trying to get some part of what I used to have with him. Some kind of *good* feeling. Some kind of *happy* feeling.

But it's not there.

"That was so good." He lies on top of me. His heartbeat pierces through his skin into mine.

"Yeah."

He lifts his head up and stares at me. "Did I go too soon?"

"No, no. It was good. Don't worry about it." I give up on trying to make a convincing lie. It doesn't matter.

"I'll be right back." He lifts himself off of me and tiptoes to the bathroom.

I stare at the ceiling. The hummingbirds have started carrying knives. I want to leave. Guilt and regret flood my body the way the pleasure used to. I tend to regret these kinds of decisions, but always the next day. This is bullshit.

He comes back to bed and rolls over to face me. "Is something wrong? You were happy and hyper and shit like, two weeks ago. You walked to my house for fuck's sake. You'd be up all night wanting to do things. I mean, fuck, you'd be up when I had to wake up for work at four. You're tired all the time now, and obviously you're not enjoying this anymore. You're not pregnant, are you?"

"No, I'm not pregnant, and I don't really get what you're trying to say to me right now."

“Nothing.” He lies on his back now, arms against his sides.

“Think I’m gonna go home.” I slide out of his bed as fast as I can and race to get dressed as coolly as possible.

“Aurora!” He sort of pleads, but doesn’t get out of bed or make any real effort to stop me.

I hurry down to my car and speed away from his house. Thankfully the roads are pretty empty at this time of night.

I hate this city. I hate all cities. The people are shit. The environment is shit. Everything’s just shit. I park my car in a shitty parking lot and take a short shitty walk in this shitty weather.

The wind is crisp, biting, gnawing at my face and dry lips. I tied my hair back in a ponytail before I began my walk because I guess I feel the need for unobstructed vision as I attempt to kill myself. Despite that effort, my hair still blows into my face. Fucking hair.

As I stand on the bridge, I think about how the jump doesn’t always kill you. The currents carry the survivors out to sea where they eventually drown. Diving head first is probably my best option. Drowning isn’t very appealing to me. I look for rocks but find this pointless at night. Artificial lighting on the bridge doesn’t do much to illuminate anything below the surface of the water. Without the rocks, I have no idea if I’m even high enough to do any real damage when I hit the water. I try to think of all those science shows where they talk about surface tension and how if you hit a body of water fast enough, it’s like hitting cement. I can’t remember any numbers though. Fucking numbers.

The hummingbirds come back in force, wielding shotguns this time. They pass around pictures of what my death would look like. One version includes my bloated, green body washing up on some shore down the river like on CSI. Another shows me sunken in the silt at the bottom of the river, slowly decomposing.

Everything would be awesome if everything just ended. I wouldn't have to worry about any pain or uncertainty. I wouldn't have any worries or cares or anyone to disappoint. I would have death, and that is what I want.

My hearts flutters. I'm not a fan of heights. I really didn't think this out very well. Nevertheless, I inch closer and closer to the precipice. My hands begin to go numb, and the cold metal doesn't help. It's a strange feeling wanting to die but not wanting your hands to lose their grip, causing you to fall to your death. It has to be on my terms. Fate has fucked with me enough.

A few cars whiz past me. I hope they don't see me. Please don't let anyone stop and try to save me.

Five, four, three,

Afterword

Now that you have read the stories, I would like to take the time to go over each of them and the characters' respective disorders. Please keep in mind that I will be providing brief summaries of the disorders to help you, the reader, better understand the characters and the story behind the story. This is by no means meant to be an exhaustive list of potential symptoms, and please do not try to diagnose yourself or anyone you know based on these stories and summaries. If you do believe that someone you know, or maybe even you, is suffering from one of these disorders, I encourage you to seek help. None of the short stories included in this collection end with the person seeking help for a reason. It is very common for those who live with a psychological disorder to remain untreated for their entire life. It is unnecessary pain that can be helped. All of these disorders are manageable with the right assistance from a trained medical provider.

Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) – “Gunmetal”

Posttraumatic stress disorder is “the development of characteristic symptoms following exposure to an extreme traumatic stressor... or learning about the unexpected or violent death, serious harm or threat, or injury experienced by a family member or close associate” (American Psychiatric Association, 2000, p. 463). A change in the body's response to stress as a result of the traumatic event causes this disorder. Stress hormones and neurotransmitters are affected, which trigger the symptoms of PTSD (A.D.A.M., 2012). These symptoms include:

- Re-experiencing or re-living the traumatic event, often through flashbacks and nightmares;
- Avoidance, which takes the form of avoiding places or people that remind the person of the event, forgetting major details of the event, efforts to avoid thoughts/feelings/conversations relating to the trauma and/or emotional numbing;
- Arousal or hyperarousal where the person is irritable, easily startled, has difficulty falling or staying asleep, and/or has difficulty concentrating (A.D.A.M., 2012; Peeler, Chung, Stedmon, & Skirton, 2012; American Psychiatric Association, 2000, p. 467-468).

PTSD is common in today's media with more and more reports of returning soldiers suffering from the disorder. However, the occurrence of PTSD is not limited to military veterans. PTSD can follow a major disaster (such as a fire or flood), rape, assault, or domestic abuse (A.D.A.M., 2012). It is not well known, though, that PTSD can also follow the sudden and/or violent death of a close friend or family member (Brent, Mortitz, Bridge, Perper, & Canobbio, 1996; Melhelm et al., 2004; American Psychiatric Association, 2000). In "Gunmetal," Zoe's father develops PTSD from his deployment to Afghanistan, and Zoe develops PTSD symptoms from the disappearance and suicide of Aaron.

Zoe fits the latter half of the definition above and exhibits several of the symptoms listed above. Soon after she learns that Aaron has killed himself, she begins experiencing vivid nightmares. The first day Zoe returns to school after Aaron's death,

she has a lot of difficulty coming back to a place that reminds her so much of Aaron. She is unable to successfully avoid this situation, and consequently has a strong emotional reaction to the environment. This type of reaction to environmental triggers has been seen especially in women suffering from PTSD (C. Wade, RN, PHN, CADC-I, personal communication, April 11, 2013). Zoe also displays some avoidance in not going to Aaron's gravestone after her first experience brought up a lot of negative emotions and painful memories.

Though we do not see all of the father's symptoms due to the story's point of view, his PTSD is hinted at in several places upon his return home. Zoe's father shows signs of avoidance and irritability when he and Zoe talk about Aaron's suicide for the first time. He becomes short with Zoe, displaying abnormal levels of anger and irritation. He also abruptly changes the subject from the actual death of Aaron to Zoe's personal life surrounding him, which could be viewed as an attempt to avoid a conversation related to his own trauma. Furthermore, Zoe's father is unable to recall important details about the event in that he cannot remember when the event happened or which weapon the soldier used to kill himself. The occurrence of flashbacks is hinted at during the scene where the Sergeant Major is sitting with Zoe in the car after she runs out of the funeral. Zoe notes that "[h]er dad's eyes glaze over. She can almost see an image of each soldier running through his mind." This leads the reader into thinking that he is experiencing some kind of flashback, where he has checked out of reality and is back in Afghanistan witnessing the death of soldier after soldier. It is also revealed at the end of the story that Zoe's dad has been dreaming about the soldiers he knew who he lost in the war.

For PTSD to be diagnosed, the symptoms have to have occurred after the person was exposed to a traumatic event. A 'traumatic event' is specified as one in which the person saw or experienced something that presented an actual, threatened, or perceived threat of death, serious injury, or harm to self or others where the person's "initial response to the event involves fear, helplessness, or horror" (American Psychiatric Association, 2000 p. 468; Johnson, Krystal, & Southwick, 2008).

The length at which Aaron's disappearance is presented in the story is meant to build up the trauma that Zoe is going through. Aaron disappears, he leaves on a peculiar note between him and Zoe, and then Zoe finds out that Aaron killed himself. She is constantly worried that some kind of harm has come to Aaron, making his silence even worse for her. There was an extended period of time in which she perceived there to be a serious threat of death or injury to Aaron. Her response is one of helplessness and fear where she is glued to her TV set, continually calling Aaron, and is essentially paralyzed by the event. This prolonged stress and trauma of losing someone so close to her so abruptly has the potential to cause PTSD.

As for Zoe's father, his PTSD is caused by his deployment to a war zone. Between 2000 and 2009, PTSD occurred in .5% of service members, with 60% of PTSD cases occurring in the Army (Lovering, Proctor, & Heaton, 2013). Zoe's father is a Sergeant Major in the Army, and this association makes him more susceptible to developing PTSD. There is an increased risk for PTSD in those serving in combat zones, those who engaged in close-contact fighting with the enemy, and those who have witnessed allied and/or civilian deaths (Cesur, Sabia, & Tekin, 2013). The reader knows

that Zoe's father has witnessed allied deaths and may have experienced close contact fighting or seen the deaths of civilians.

While PTSD has existed for thousands of years under different names such as "shell shock" and is described in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* (Roberts, n.d.), there is still a very strong stigma against PTSD which can deter some from seeking treatment. Zoe's father does not seek treatment during the time that the story takes place, does not appear to make any efforts to seek any treatment, and there is no discussion of *PTSD* within the story. Zoe's father is most likely ignoring his potential PTSD diagnosis, and Zoe doesn't realize she may have PTSD at all.

In addition to the symptoms themselves, is the length of time that these symptoms must persist. For PTSD to be diagnosed, the symptoms must be experienced for one month or longer; if symptoms are experienced for less than one month, the individual is diagnosed with acute stress disorder (Peeler et al., 2012; Holmes & Singewald, 2012; American Psychiatric Association, 2000). The ending of the story is intended to be several months after Aaron's funeral, establishing a time frame in which Zoe and her father have been experiencing PTSD symptoms. In the final scene where Zoe and her father are going to the cemetery, the narrator notes that Zoe's father hadn't slept that night. Sleep disturbance, especially several months after the traumatic event, is an indication of PTSD (American Psychiatric Association, 2000). Before leaving the cemetery, Zoe and her father discuss having dreams about their respective "ghosts," so to speak, showing that Zoe and her father have been discussing their experiences and that these experiences have been persisting for a long time. The audience knows what Zoe dreams about, and while they do not know what the Sergeant Major dreams about,

readers should assume the Sergeant Major is experiencing some kind of nightmare or reliving the events through dreams just as Zoe is.

Impulse Control Disorder – “Extinguished”

Impulse control disorders (ICDs) are the failure to resist an impulse, drive, or temptation to perform an act...” (American Psychological Association, 2000, p. 663). The diagnosis for an ICDs includes a person’s “failure to resist an impulse to perform some act that is harmful to the individual or others; an increased sense of arousal or tension prior to committing or engaging in the act; an experience of either pleasure, gratification, or release of tension at the time of committing the act” (Dell’Osso, Altamura, Allen, Marazziti, & Hollander, 2006, p.465). While ICDs manifest in several different ways, e.g., trichotillomania (pulling one’s hair out), pathological gambling, and kleptomania; the ICD seen in “Extinguished” is pyromania.

Pyromania is the “pattern of firesetting for pleasure, gratification, or relief of tension” in the absence of external motivators, such as money or revenge (American Psychiatric Association, 2000, p.663, Dell’Osso, Altamura, Allen, Marazziti, & Hollander, 2006). A pyromaniac participates in impulsive, repetitive, intentional, and pathological firesetting, often accompanied with an arousal of some kind before the fire (stress, depressive mood, crisis point in life) and a feeling of release or gratification after setting the fire (Thompson & Winstead, 2008; Hoertel, Strat, Schuster, & Limosin, 2011; Cunningham, Timms, Holloway, & Radford, 2011; Thompson & Winstead, 2008). An attraction to, interest in, obsession over, or curiosity about fires and fire making

instruments is also part of the diagnostic criteria for pyromania (Thompson & Winstead, 2008).

Throughout the story, the impulsive and repetitive nature of Luci's firesetting is seen. The repetition in particular is exhibited when Luci lights anything (mostly lighters and matches). She doesn't just light the artifact once and watch a single flame burn continuously. Instead, she repetitively lights, then blows out, and then lights again the lighter she plays with at the beginning of the story after returning from lighting a house she set on fire. She lights one match, blows that one out, then lights a second one which is used to set the house on fire in the second firesetting scene. Then in prison, she ignites a flame using the lighter, kills it, and then lights it again. Her impulsivity in firesetting is shown briefly when Luci mentions the Zippo that she keep in her car for her fingers to play with while she's sitting in traffic.

The scenes showing Luci's interactions with lighters and matches also illustrate her fascination with fire setting material. She surrounds herself with firesetting material, keeping lighters, matches, and accelerant at her apartment and found entertainment in starting electrical fires at her job. The language Luci uses during fire scenes, speaking in shorter rapid fire sentences, and the heavy personification of the fire show that she is completely captivated by the combustion.

The causes for firesetting behaviors and the demographics of those that set fires varies to such an extreme that it is difficult to pin down predictors, causes, and sometimes even the true symptoms on pyromania (Burton et al., 2012; Cunningham et al., 2011; Thompson & Winstead, 2008; Grant & Kim, 2007). A study by Grant & Kim (2007) noted that sometimes a life stressor preceded a firesetting event, however roughly 25% of

participants reported no such stressor. The event of Luci losing her job was incorporated to provide a stressor for her final act of firesetting before she turns herself in; however, no stressor of any kind was introduced for the first fire scene. This is intended to show that while a stressor *can* be the cause of firesetting behavior, a stressor is not necessarily a requirement. In Luci's case, she sets fire under both conditions. The initial fire described in the story is an experience of pleasure, as noted in the diagnosis, and the second in an experience of relieved tension, indicated by her relaxation in front of the fire after being in an agitated state since being fired.

Cunningham et al. (2011) discuss one particular motivator within their sample of females convicted of fire-related charges. This motivator is "achievement and control" (22). Because some of the interviewees were able to take responsibility for their actions, firesetting signified to them a control over a realm. They were proud of their firesetting, especially when fire crews were called. Some interviewees also liked the extra control they had over their consequences in being able to choose whether or not they admitted to having set the fires—something that is unique to firesetting. In each fire scene, Luci only leaves when she hears the sound of fire engines, providing a sense of accomplishment in that her 'art' warranted that kind of attention. Her control over her realm of firesetting was established through intentionally creating a victimless situation with her fires. She never turns herself in for setting fires until she kills someone. The unexpected result of several fatalities during her usually 'controlled' behavior creates an overwhelming amount of guilt and eventually leads her to confessing to setting the fires.

The general public assumes that all 'pyromaniacs' are 'arsonists' and that these people are crazy men who 'get off' on setting fires and seeing other people in pain

(Burton, McNiel, & Binder, 2012). In this sense, Luci plays with the reader's expectations of firesetting and arson. Luci is a smart young woman, does not fulfill any sexual desires with her fires, and purposefully attempts to avoid causing pain to others—contrary to what most people think they understand about pyromania. Pyromania itself is a psychological diagnosis where firesetting is defined as a behavior which pyromaniacs exhibit (Burton et al., 2012). *Arson*, however, is a legal term where the perpetrator sets fire to or assists in setting fire to the property or dwelling of another with malicious intent (Hirby, n.d.). Burton et al. (2012) also state that pyromania is actually uncommon in arson cases. Pyrophilia has been adopted as the term used to describe those who gain sexual satisfaction out of setting fires (Burton et al., 2012).

As the story progresses and Luci finds out about the deaths she had caused, she tries to stop her firesetting behavior. She gets rid of all of her matchbooks, lighters, and flammable liquids, but *still* has a powerful urge to light something while she's in the police station. In the final scenes of the story, the reader sees her struggle continue while she's in jail. She feels overwhelmingly guilty about wanting to set fires, but her desire is so strong that she's driven to try to burn herself to stop the cravings. The flashbacks to her childhood and teenage firesetting behavior are meant to show how deeply rooted her disorder is. This kind of disorder can start when someone is young and continue throughout his or her life--not some sort of "stage" that one grows out of. Her flashbacks cover a span of time from her childhood, where she played with her dad's lighter, to high school where there was even more opportunity to satisfy her firesetting impulses. At the very end, Luci admits that she still sets fires while in prison, showing how difficult it

really is to overcome these impulses without some kind of in-patient treatment, which she is not receiving in prison.

Finally, arson is a very difficult offense to prosecute. It is estimated that only 17% of arson cases in the United States result in an arrest and only 3% result in a conviction (Hoertel et al., 2011). Because arson is often committed alone and under the cover of darkness, it is difficult to find the perpetrators. It is this low prosecution rate that provides pyromaniacs the ability to control their consequences to some extent, as discussed earlier. These statistics were very influential in developing the legal aspects of the story. The low conviction rate made it possible for Luci to have set so many arsons without getting caught. It also explains the questioning that Luci received at the police station since it could have been likely that she was making a false confession for some kind of ulterior motive.

Substance Abuse Disorder – Junk

A Substance Use Disorder (SUD) is a chronic, relapsing condition where a person experiences compulsive drug-seeking and drug-taking behaviors, even when the person knows there is the potential for negative consequences (Solum, 2008; American Psychiatric Association, 2000). In order for an SUD to be diagnosed, the use of the substance must cause a noted disturbance in a person's life. Examples of such disturbances include skipping work to partake in the use of the substance, using the substance in dangerous situations (e.g., while driving), repeated legal issues such as substance-related disorderly conduct charges, and the continuation of use despite conflicts with family members and close friends over the use of the drug (American

Psychiatric Association, 2000; Martin, 2008). The *DSM-IV* separates substance-related disorders into classes including cannabis, alcohol, opioids, et cetera (American Psychiatric Association, 2000). Substance abuse can lead to dependency, which is part of a substance use disorder. The onset of dependency includes failed attempts to quit using, lots of time devoted to the drug(s) over other responsibilities, and the presence of tolerance or withdrawal.

In “Junk,” Hol displays many of the characteristics associated with an SUD related to heroin, in particular, substance dependency. Hol is shown skipping school due to withdrawal symptoms (signaled by his body aches and fever), shirking family duties by abandoning his sister to go get high, and continuing his use even when it means losing his best friend, Inoke. Hol also shows several signs of chemical dependence on heroin. During the scene where his walk to school is interrupted by Tamir and Iggy, Tamir taunts Hol for always trying to go without heroin for a few days; however, Hol is never able to ‘quit’ his habit. Withdrawal symptoms peak between 48 and 72 hours after last use, meaning that Hol turns back to heroin right when his withdrawal is at its worst (National Institute on Drug Abuse [NIDA], 2010). These factors could be an indication that he is developing or has already developed a heroin dependency.

Heroin dependence and use has risen since the early 2000’s, though exact numbers vary by survey. 1.2% percent of twelfth-graders surveyed in 2009 had tried heroin at least once in their lifetime (Johnston, O’Malley, Bachman, & Schulenberg, 2010); past-month heroin use among American citizens 12 years of age or older increased from 161,000 in 2007 to 281,000 in 2011 (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2012; Oracle Education Foundation, n.d.). The use of heroin and other

opioids is most problematic when the user is in his or her late teens or early twenties, and most first time users of heroin are between the ages of sixteen and twenty-four (American Psychiatric Association, 2000). Adolescents are at a *much* greater risk of becoming dependent on a substance due to the stage of brain development during that time (C. Wade, RN, PHN, CADC-I, personal communication, April 11, 2013). Tamir, Inoke, and Hol all fall into this age range, and the story shows the paths that young people can take—become addicted like Hol and Tamir or stop using like Inoke.

Susceptibility to an SUD has been studied at length. Some studies have shown an environmental correlation for substance abuse in that SUDs are common in areas of poverty, unemployment, crowded living conditions, and single-parent households, and are influenced by societal norms and peer pressure (Kanekar & Sharma, 2008; Solem, 2008). Other studies have shown that SUDs frequently occur comorbid with many other psychological disorders (A.D.A.M., 2012; Howard et al., 2010; C. Marczynski, Ph.D., personal communication, March 7, 2013). There is also strong evidence supporting a powerful genetic influence on a person's susceptibility to substance abuse, especially with alcohol (A.D.A.M., 2011; Mayfield, Harris, & Schukit, 2008; Prescott & Kendler, 1999; U.S. Congress Office of Technology Assessment, 1993; National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, 2008).

Several of these believed causes for substance abuse appear within “Junk.” While a lineage of heroin use is not seen in Hol's family, Hol's father is shown to have a fairly severe case of alcohol addiction and abuse, which potentially demonstrates his genetic predisposition to a substance-related disorder. It is stated that Hol had experimented with several other types of drugs before starting heroin. The final scene where Hol shoots up

for the first time shows the influence of peer pressure. Even though Inoke was telling him to leave, Hol felt more pressure from Tamir and Iggy (and most likely from the drug itself) and sided with them. Tamir's family is briefly discussed when the narrator describes his living situation in a dirty apartment with his brother. There is not discussion of Tamir's parents, and as stated earlier, those in a single parent household are more likely to develop a substance-related disorder.

Bipolar Disorder – “Plunge”

Bipolar disorder is a mood disorder that is characterized by a person experiencing extreme mood swings from a very high, elated, and sometimes psychotic state (manic/hypomanic state) to severe depression and suicidal ideation (depressive state) (Mynatt, Cunningham, & Manning, 2002; Fenderman & Andersen, 2010; American Psychiatric Association, 2000). Bipolar disorder has four sub-categories, the most prevalent are bipolar I and bipolar II (the other two categories are cyclothymia and bipolar disorder not otherwise specified) (American Psychiatric Association, 2000; Mynatt et al., 2002). The occurrences of mania, hypomania, and major depression determine the type of bipolar that one has. A bipolar I diagnosis requires one or more manic or mixed (experiencing both high and low moods simultaneously) episodes with at least one depressive episode (American Psychiatric Association, 2000). The manic episode must last at least one week to qualify for this diagnosis. Bipolar II requires one or more major depressive episodes with at least one hypomanic (a less exaggerated form of manic) episode (American Psychiatric Association, 2000; Fenderman & Anderson, 2010; C. Marczyński, Ph.D., personal communication, April 7, 2013).

It is estimated that 1% of the global population has bipolar disorder, and it is represented more or less equally among males and females (McCandless & Sladen, 2003). Persons with bipolar disorder often go through several misdiagnoses before reaching the correct diagnosis because treatment is often only sought when the person is on the depressive side of the spectrum (Mynatt et al., 2002; C. Marczyński, Ph.D., personal communication, March 7, 2013).

The manic state of bipolar disorder is characterized as a natural “high.” The reader enters Aurora’s life in “Plunge” during one of these episodes. Those in manic states experience increased productivity, hyperactivity, decreased need for sleep, increased talkativeness, and increased involvement in pleasurable activities, but also distractibility, irritability, and increased risk taking.

Aurora exhibits a manic state at the beginning of this story. Her mania is indicated by several events. Her ten mile walk, filled with distracted thinking and general disregard for her safety while walking around a city at night show a decreased need for sleep, an extreme excess of energy, and recklessness. An indulgence in pleasurable activities is shown by the sexual relationship that she has with Brad and Ricky. In addition to her walk, Aurora also displays hyperactivity when she talks about the many notebooks she has been filling with writings and drawings. These types of actions are common in people with bipolar disorder experiencing a manic episode (C. Marczyński, Ph.D., personal communication, March 7, 2013).

The major depression associated with bipolar disorder is a very severe form of depression. This state often occurs immediately before or immediately after a manic episode (Loosen & Shelton, 2008). The person experiencing a depressive episode

undergoes a serious lack of motivation, a feeling of running on empty, agitation and irritability, difficulty thinking and remembering, a sense of worthlessness or guilt, a desire to become socially withdrawn, a disturbance in sleep and appetite, an inability to enjoy once pleasurable activities, and suicidal ideation (American Psychiatric Association, 2000; Fenderman & Anderson, 2010).

The second half of the story follows Aurora through a depressive state. She is smoking, seeing life in a negative way (comparing her life to the flooded kitchen caused by a broken pipe), staying in bed, unable to concentrate, disinterested in things she previously enjoyed with fervor, and suicidal thoughts. Her depression is also pointed out by Brad when he notes that Aurora has had a dramatic change in mood and personality since the last time they got together. Such dramatic shifts are often noticed by those who know the person pretty well (C. Marczynski, Ph.D., personal communication, March 7, 2013). Previous episodes of depression are alluded to when Ashley mentions a previous time in their college career when Aurora was severely depressed.

These extremes in mood can be very dangerous to a person with bipolar disorder. Manic/hypomanic episodes are associated with diminished decision-making capacity and participation in risky behaviors. These can lead to financial ruin, sexual indiscretion, and bodily harm (Martino, Strejilevich, Torralva, & Manes, 2011). As discussed earlier, Aurora had multiple sexual partners. The reader meets Brad and hears about Ricky through Ashley. Aurora also puts herself in danger by walking through the city alone at night and driving irresponsibly after leaving Brad's house. A similar diminished decision-making capacity occurs during depressive episodes, when bipolar patients experience increased vulnerability to suicidal behavior (Martino et al., 2011; Solem,

2008). Suicide claims between twenty and twenty-two percent of persons with bipolar disorder (Solem, 2008; Fenderman & Anderson, 2010). The reader sees Aurora's morbid thoughts become more morbid and suicidal at the end of the story. It is left up to the reader to decide whether Aurora jumps.

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