

THE PENNSYLVANIA STATE UNIVERSITY
SCHREYER HONORS COLLEGE

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

A Study on Mental Health Portrayal in Contemporary Creative Writing

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SPRING 2022

A thesis
submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements
for a baccalaureate degree
in English and Philosophy
with honors in English

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ABSTRACT

This project explores the different portrayals of those with mental illnesses in contemporary creative writing within the realm of fiction. These creative pieces offer examples of the multitude of portrayals that are found in modern literature. Some portrayals offer critiques of the uninformed and assumptive manner in which mentally ill persons are represented, while others attempt to give a more realistic understanding of the true intentions, thought processes, and effects that mental illnesses can have on the lives of those who have them, as well as on the lives of those around them. This project is a blend of fact and fiction, proving that the line between the two when it comes to characters dealing with a mental illness is unacceptably blurred.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Professor Charlotte Holmes for the hours or meetings, emails, and consultations that led me to my topic and eventually the conclusion of my work, as well as the faith and trust she put in me throughout this process. I want to thank Professor Kevin Bell for encouraging and inspiring me with my writing, as well as Professor William Cobb who pushed my writing beyond where I thought I was capable of performing.

Chapter 1

A Reflective Essay

Mental health portrayal in contemporary literature consistently over dramatizes the effects of mental illnesses and associates mental illness with tragedy. An overwhelming majority of modern fiction uses mental illness as a jumping off point to coax the reader towards expecting a tale of woe and misfortune. Take stories such as *13 Reasons Why*, *The Silent Patient*, *Mind on Fire*, and more. The blend of fact and fiction behind the mental illnesses portrayed leaves readers with what they think is a comprehensive understanding on how mental illnesses work, when in fact they are more uneducated on reality than when they started. Showing this in some pieces and parts of pieces and contrasting it in others was the purpose of this paper. Some stories hold on to the idea of tragedy and despair while others incorporate some more realistic elements of normal life. Being able to share my personal experiences with mental health as well as offer an inclusive collection of mental health related stories is the driving force behind my article.

In 1883, a German psychiatrist, Emil Kräpelin, published a system that defined mental illness and drew real scientific interest to the concept. Diagnoses became more common as the years went on, and places like work spaces and system of education learned how to work with mental disabilities rather than against them, implementing new laws to make sure discrimination did not occur. 504 plans and IEPs were given in schools to allow students to function better, and accommodations such as alternative working spaces and more flexible hours became available as needed in the work space. The need then arose in other areas of life to begin to bring mental

illness out of the shadows and start a larger discussion while emphasizing the importance of inclusion and representation.

When it comes to literature, mental health portrayal and the representation of those suffering from a mental disability had been severely skewed, promoting the idea that there was only one way that mental illness could be portrayed and connected with- through tragedy. Stories of woe and sadness dominated mental illness related fiction works and still does. Look at the “Turn of the Screw” or “The Yellow Wallpaper”. These are older stories that still share the same connection between mental illness and misery and anguish befalling characters. But why does this happen? Why is it that so many of these narratives are tailored to give a specific interpretation of those who are mentally ill, in any regard? I am not implying that there is no sorrow or tragedy associated with mental illness- that is oftentimes the case, but why is that so overwhelmingly the case in pieces that are supposed to make a point? Why do stories like *Mrs Dalloway* or *An Unquiet Mind* deal so heavily with tragedy?

I attribute this to authors that have had a singular experience with mental illness and think that they have to share some extraordinary tale of devastation or extremities for their views and experiences to hold any weight. With some of my pieces, I wanted to combat that notion by showing the simpler, more mundane or even unextraordinary moments of mental illness. My goal of this piece is to offer a variety of views on mental health, from the cliché way that it has been shown far too often to stories that are based in something more powerful than tragedy- truth and research. In preparing for this essay, I talked to dozens of people, many of whom I had a

personal relationship with before, to get a wider range of perspective on how people view mental illness in literature and their own personal experiences with mental health. I heard stories that were upsetting, terrifying, heart warming, and confusing. My goal through this essay is to provide the reader with more. More material to consider, more perspectives to think of, and more time to contemplate the previous works that they have become accustomed to.

A tradition that writers have recently become much more aware and cognizant of is the correlation between the supernatural and the mentally disabled. A piece like the “Turn of the Screw” can blur the line between these two, which is also what happens in my first piece, entitled, “They Would Say It Was A Shame”. The piece is purposefully vague to show the divide that gets placed between the reader and characters already when they have a mental illness the reader is unfamiliar with and to prove that divide only deepens when a supernatural element is introduced. This piece in particular does not state the supernatural element, making it a possibility that some readers will read it just as a story about schizophrenia, however the distance between character and reader is still there because of the singular view of schizophrenia that is portrayed. Heavy influence can be found here from *Mrs Dalloway* as there is evident in that story a divide between the mentally ill and others not affected- this is proven in the fact that Clarissa and Septimus never actually meet (Woolf). “Till Death Do Us Part” does the same thing, more clearly connecting the issues of the supernatural and mental health. That story starts off giving a slightly more normalized portrayal of anxiety, showing regular life begin to play a role in the way that the anxiety gets brought up and becomes important. But by the time the super natural element has been introduced, the tragedy has already taken place and the cliché resumed.

Between My Father and the King was heavily referred to for inspiration and emotional development of these tragic moments.

“Four Letters” is based on interviews and conversations with an anonymous source who shared the experience of having a PTSD flashback episode. Note the similarities and differences between the “episodes” or “hallucinations” found in this story and in *Mrs Dalloway*. The story stays within the “normal” realm of everyday life, connecting the reader more to the events and finally introducing the idea that those with mental illnesses are able to function in normal situations, such as going to school. The vividness of the flashback as well as the reactions of the school and the rest of the characters are reflective of actual responses and instances that were shared with me regarding PTSD. This piece serves as a tether to the “real world” and what is plausible to expect of those with mental illness.

Now would be a good opportunity to mention why most of my pieces deal with kids. The original reason lies in the fact that I myself grew up with several mental health disorders and am able to glean the most experience and personal connection from that time of my life, hence the relation to many young characters. Mental illness is also far harder to control and get a handle on at a younger age, meaning that characters with mental illness at a young age are more prevalent and plausible. Many mental illness symptoms such as those associated with ADHD and anxiety dwindle or disguise themselves as other things upon aging, meaning that the signs are clearer for audiences and readers if the subject is younger. However, it is important to note that there is an element of shaping that goes on with kids as well as the readers that I wanted to draw a parallel

in between. Children are impressionable and moldable, and I would like to think that by reading influential material and opening readers' minds to new possibilities and situations, they can also hold the same moldable capabilities that gives hope towards seeing mental illness in a different light in literature. I took into account the intensity of narratives such as *An Unquiet Mind* and *Dear Friend: from My Life I Write to You in Your Life* and used the adult influence from those in other pieces such as "Mindless" and "Till Death Do Us Part", however, decided to operate in contrast for "Cheetos", "Chapters", "Four Letters", and "They Would Say It Was A Shame".

My next piece, "Mindless" is a smaller snippet that deals with the idea of triggers. This is a word that gets thrown around a lot, both verbally and in literature, and it holds a heavy meaning, one that is taken for granted. It is an example of a larger trigger sending someone who has clear signs of trauma into a mental headspace that is hard to get out of, one that she clearly struggles with. Consideration here was given to the way that Andrew Solomon talks about depression and the effects it can have on pregnant women in *The Noonday Demon*, as well as outside anonymous accounts. But the misconception lies in the fact that not all triggers have to be huge life changing events, as was seen in "Four Letters", as well as in another story, "Cheetos". That piece is infused with an overly wrapped up ending, Hallmark style if you will, to prove the exact opposite of the previous story, and to give nod to the almost too perfect way that some of the stories included in *Hateship, Friendship, Courtship, Loveship, Marriage*. There are some triggers that are much smaller and much more ordinary, like a performance or seeing someone that has a great deal of emotional effect on you. The reality of most people's situations lie somewhere in the middle of these two stories, and they serve to be heavily contrasting foils of each other.

My last excerpt is based on personal experience, both with the events and the emotions and results associated with them while still holding its form as fiction. They are based around myself having a dependent social personality disorder with generalized anxiety, depression, and ADHD. The combination of these disorders has meant that my personal experience has been very different than a lot of other people that qualify as having a mental disorder, and I strongly feel that the stories that we connect most to are the ones that readers will also connect the most to. See the works included in *Between My Father and the King* as proof that personalized stories hit hardest, such as “Gorse is not People”, which is derived from Janet Frame’s own time in a mental institution. Therefore by sharing some of my experience mixed with the fiction of creative writing, I wanted to bring light particularly to a form of mental illness that a lot of people do not discuss or don’t know about- dependent social personality disorder. One of the personality disorders, dependent disorder comes out in unhealthy and often strong attachments in short periods of time, which can also result in lack of ability to perceive intent and/or purpose in actions. The want and need to form connections, even if superficial trumps the ability to use judgement and impulse control. This piece leads the reader through a series of events, all of which are connected to the effects and repercussions of having this disorder while taking you through the mental processes of someone with this disorder. The denial that is debated on and toyed with is drawn from *An Unquiet Mind* and alludes to the struggle between blaming others and blaming yourself. It is hopefully the most insightful and honest, while simple to make very clear that mental illness is not a complicated phenomenon to understand and needs to be treated with more respect and understanding than it is currently being given.

The nonfiction study *Touched With Fire* serves as the pillar for why I decided to write about mental illness in this format. Being able to have creative and expressive outlets and a surge of inspiration particularly while having a mental health crisis is the entire center of this study, and putting that idea into practice was where most of this paper came from- heightened moments of creativity on the heels of or during mental illness episodes. This combined with the analysis used in *Sights Unseen* to deal with those surrounding someone with a mental illness are the real backbones of this paper and my writing purpose. Through writing these pieces, I was able to develop an understanding of how my own experience and knowledge would be delivered to others and the way it had already affected people surrounding me, and the emotions and struggles discussed in *Sights Unseen* was integral in that realization.

My hope is that readers begin to question the perceptions that they had/have about those with mental illnesses and disorders, especially in the way they are portrayed in literature. I want readers to feel equally connected and distances from these characters, carrying the dual nature of many interactions and perceptions regarding mental health. At the very least, it is my hope that these conversations at least be started about how one can avoid more serious cliches and how to truly be inclusive and understanding when writing characters with mental illnesses.

Chapter 2

They Would Say It Was A Shame

A cool and unforgiving breeze tripped and tangled its way through the woods, winding along the singular path. Not a path, this was truly more of a course through the tangle of bushes and vines that had become commonplace in this particular location. Years of neglect by the local conservationists' society had made sure this place would never again be filled with people, some laughing at their own stupidity, drinking more than they should, or others that would sit by the water and write in short scribbled sentences. Teens exposing their bodies to the conditions of the outside world for a few hours of uninterrupted leisure during the long hot months of summer- assuming the cops didn't arrive before everyone got their fill. The place itself remembered. The trees swayed to the remnant notes of music blared through small speakers, the water of the lake quivered with the memory of hot, sweaty bodies entering her waters for a less than innocent tryst below her rolling surface. But for now the rotted wooden planks that made up dock sagged and sighed with each gust of wind, vacant and left with only the memory of slapping bare feet against the boards.

Once again the air stirred up, making sure to linger as long as it could on the exposed arms of the girl as she proceeded along her makeshift path. The sudden chill caused her to scrunch up her shoulders, cinching her dark brown wavy hair in the collar of her faded blue button up she had let hang open, which exposed the gray tank top she wore underneath. She pressed her teeth together as if a clenched jaw could keep away the cold. It was true, she was

unprepared to be out here, as was evident from the fact that her feet were encased only in dirty white socks that had originally come with a little lace frill around the top, but she had gotten Mommy to cut it for comfort purposes. But really, her single layer of clothing wasn't enough with the temperatures getting colder every night, especially at this hour, right in between when she might have been eating and going to bed. But she had truly not had a choice. The beckoning whispers of the wind had called her name, and she responded.

Evangeline...

Our Evangeline...

The feeling of being watched caused her to spin around suddenly, and her heart leapt momentarily upon seeing the figures behind her. She hadn't known her friends were there. Well, her friends were always there, she supposed, in her mind, talking to her, telling her things. But she hadn't realized that they were there just then, staring, judging. If she was honest, their presence was something of a surprise to her, not quite unwelcome, more unexpected than anything. Evangeline knew them too well. Her gaze rested briefly on the calico coat of the small house cat that was responsible for one of her constant shadows, the one whose eyes always drilled into her, the one that made her say things sometimes she didn't want to- mean things, sometimes, to people she didn't want to be mean to. Then Evangeline's strikingly green eyes jumped to her other companion, the girl whose lanky legs and straight, long hair gave her the air of someone older than Evangeline thought her to be. She was the one who directed her

movements, telling her to do things Evangeline would otherwise never dare to do, but knew she had better comply with nonetheless.

Both pairs of eyes met hers and shone, unblinking and apparently unnerved by the situation or new location they had found themselves in as their gaze stayed calm. Now that she thought about it, none of her friends seemed surprised- ever. She guessed that must be one of the things that made them better, better than her at least. That's why she listened, after all. They must be right, with how they told her things she didn't think of doing or spoke to her in unfamiliar ways. Best not to get on her friends' bad sides.

Never.

Not good, not a good idea, no, and her friends agreed, they said so, just now. They knew what was going on inside of her head, she guessed because that's where they were, too. She guessed that was where her friends lived, because they were always with her and listening to her. They only sometimes came out to talk to her. But this time they agreed, so it must be right...

But thoughts were funny, especially how they didn't always match up. For example, she thought she should be here, but then also thought that being here was wrong. That was the only thing her friends couldn't do. They didn't have answers to every question that swirled in

Evangeline's head. The questions and confusion seemed to berate her head sometimes, each one tugging at her, begging to be the foremost thought, gnawing on her, biting at her heels like rabid dogs, salivating for the kill. That was odd, why had she thought of a dog?

No, do not think, no thinking.

That instruction came from the girl who was now to Evangeline's right, almost whispered through her thin, tight lips. The suggestion whirled around to and through Evangeline's ears, making its way deep inside her.

But why not? Again, the question nagged. Why shouldn't she think?

DON'T.

She shuddered. Okay, she wouldn't.

That last command rang in her ears, and she winced. Evangeline turned away from the two figures and squeezed her eyes shut, trying not to hear the blood rushing in her ears because she already was listening to her questions and what her friends were saying and it was loud, really loud, too loud. And then she was suffocating, drowning in thoughts and noise, and tried to

draw in a breath. The breath was supposed to fill her lungs, but for some reason she felt that she couldn't quite take in enough air to do so, that her chest simply was refusing to expand to its full size. She tried again, to no avail. It was that- her inability to control something as simple as breathing- that caused moisture to pool in her eyes. Evangeline's gaze flitted around, landing on each of her fellow travelers. Her friends offered no solace, no comfort. But then, she didn't really expect them to. They never had before.

Her thoughts, her head, they felt heavy, and why were leaves, the sky, spinning? She stumbled back a few paces, her back colliding with a tree with enough force to make her gasp audibly. Still rooted to that spot, she sank down, grasping her heavy head between her hands, as if she had to hold her thoughts in or they would spill out. Maybe not a bad idea...

No.

Okay, no spilling thoughts, okay.

Heartbeats passed, one after another, and the light that had already been fading around her seeped away completely. She found herself in that dark when she opened her eyes, unaware of the time she had just lost- not that she would have cared anyways. However, the lost time wasn't important enough to dwell on at that moment.

Then that moment ended, sliced through by the distant sound of a siren. Another joined in, and then there were voices. They ebbed and stretched, coming and going, like they were going back and forth, back and forth, like they were searching for something. Something that was lost. Something that had run away, maybe. Maybe they were looking for something, or someone, that had been told by her friends to walk out the door and keep walking, someone with dirty blonde pigtails and dirty white cut-off lace socks...

Stop it. They aren't looking for you, why would they be looking for you.

Okay. Her friends must be right- why would they be? Now it seemed ridiculous that she had thought that in the first place- although she didn't quite know why...

Now there were voices that had joined in with the sirens, and Evangeline saw out of the corner of her eye a sweeping beam of light, then another. The voices continued, talking, discussing. There was something in the voices, was it worry? But her friends seemed adamant that she should not move, not speak. Do nothing. In fact, she should get down further, make herself small, make sure they didn't see her. Okay.

The voices continued.

“-keep heading towards the highway, I guess.” The voice paused, broken by a loud puff of air, with a sort of groan built in. “But damn it, I wish her parents had told us sooner. Mighta meant she hadn’t gotten as far, woulda been easier. Just a few extra hours” A sigh, that was it.

“Yeah, because that family ever asks for help?” This voice was sharper, higher, tinged with a harshness. “Hell no, we’re lucky they called at all-”

“No I’m-” The first voice interrupted himself again with another sigh. “I know, it just- ain’t fair for the kid. That’s all.”

They weren’t as close anymore. That was why she was listening, after all. Not to hear what they were saying, but to hear if they were close or far. Her friends had been the ones who told her to listen to see when the voices were gone. And she did what they said.

A few minutes passed, the voices faded entirely, and then her friends said she was allowed to get up, they were okay with that. She stood, grimacing slightly when she placed her hand against the trunk of her tree to help her stand. Looking down at her palm she noticed the dark smear across her skin. It hurt. Maybe it happened when she sat down. Maybe Mommy and Daddy could make the pain go away, fix her hand so it was good as new. They always said they were the only ones who could make things better, and she didn’t need anybody else. Maybe

that's why her friends told her to hide from the sad voices. Maybe they knew only Mommy could fix it, maybe they wanted her to go back to Mommy, maybe-

NO.

Okay. No Mommy. Just her friends. She knew better than to argue, it never went well.

She started to walk again, moving through the trees, pushing branches out of the way, enjoying slightly the way they snapped back. Each step brought her closer to the lake. When that dark, barely moving surface was finally within her sight, she found herself breathing in the damp air, enjoying the way the cold bite tickled the inside of her lungs. The sensation wasn't quite pleasant, but at least the feeling was different. And her friends didn't seem to mind. She took another few steps closer to that wilted dock that was barely stable enough to tread on. But tread on the rotted planks she did. As soon as she reached the dock, she knew. Her friends didn't even have to tell her that was what was willed. She just knew this time. After another few paces, the wood creaked under her muddied toes, making her pause. She looked down, regarding the cat by her side. But she'd heard the new command already, hissed from both mouths, human and not, and didn't think to resist.

Run.

After all, her other friend was standing at the end of the dock. The boy. He was her age, of course, her favorite of all of them. He didn't make her do not-nice things, he just stood there, usually when the air and space around her was quiet. Evangeline would never tell her other friends that he was her favorite, although she suspected they knew. They always knew. So when he opened his arms and when all her friends urged her forward, Evangeline didn't hesitate. She started at a walk, then sped faster, racing towards the figure planted at the end of the dock, welcoming her. Her friends had never welcomed her before, she liked it. She liked the light feeling on her chest as her feet slapped the wet wood, slapped harder and faster. She closed her eyes as she sped forward. Then her feet felt light, too, like she was flying, flying. She felt so light, she was flying...

Floating...

They would find her body later. They would find it after she had washed onto the shore of the lake, her dulled green eyes stretched wide, not in fear, but with simple surprise. At least that is what would be told in hushed voices whenever the topic came up. But who could tell, really? Who would have really known what was going on in her head? No one.

They would say her death was a shame.

Chapter 3

Till Death Do Us Part

A thick shroud of mist made its way across the shingled rooftops, slinking and shivering along, twisting its fingers around the chimneys and threading itself into the smallest cracks it could find in the bricks that made up most of the buildings. It was this mist, the kind that could choke you if it wanted to, that touched lightly across the exposed skin of the young woman who was stumbling on what seems like each and every fault in the pavement on which her high heeled shoes clicked. Maybe it was because of these shoes that she was having such a difficult time in her procession; she seemed to realize this, as a second later, her fingers gripped the back of the shoes, struggling to take them off. Once she had succeeded in her task, discarding the shoes to the side of the road, she continued to move, going quicker now. She was still stumbling, but perhaps that was because of the blurriness of her eyes, muddled with tears and mascara. At that moment, a sob escaped her throat, but the sound was immediately swallowed up by the darkness of the night.

The woman picked up her speed a bit, which was easier to do after she had picked up the dirty white hem of the dress she wore. That dress had been so carefully and specifically selected, and she had spent so many nights staring at it, waiting patiently for the day she could wear it. Now? She would do anything to end that day, would do anything to have never had this day come to pass. Ah, if only she was still lying in her bed, surrounded by covers and pillows and cushions. Instead, the cool night air bit at her heels, and on she ran.

3 Months Earlier

Aria heard the lock on the front door start to jiggle, and immediately jumped up from the couch, grinning. That would be Tommy. He usually got home from work around this time, and she was almost always home already, seeing as she worked at the boutique right around the corner from their modest apartment, and he worked a whopping hour drive away at the law firm his father had started years before. She was always excited to see him, to run into his arms, have him sweep her off her feet and shower her with kisses, dreaming of the moment in just 3 months when they would kiss like this on the alter. Was it that soon already? Aria felt a thrill in her chest, a mixture of excitement and uncertainty, but the later went away as quickly as it came. Especially when she heard the telling creak of the door, letting her know Tommy had made his way inside. The sound sent her running towards him, and he enveloped her with a hug. He smiled through her hair, which was sprawled over both their faces.

“Hey there, you. Good day?” She nodded, unable to control her smile.

“The best. My appointment? Went so well, I was literally worried for nothing.”

“Good. Good! Honey, that’s amazing, hey, I told you she was amazing! And that was just the preliminary appointment, to get to know you and figure out what you guys might need to talk

about- trust me, it's only going to get better from here."

Aria nodded and detached herself from Tommy. She had been struggling with anxiety her whole life, but recently, likely because of the wedding, she was getting more and more anxious, her episodes all too often turning into panic attacks that had her thinking and acting irrationally, turning her into a person that she didn't want to be. And Tommy had been so helpful. He recommended Dr Kaughlin, a sweet older lady who had been a therapist for years. In fact, Tommy had seen her a few years before- after his mom passed- and she helped him get through as much as she could.

"I know, I know, I'm just so relieved, I mean, honestly. I think this is really going to help. And hey," She put a hand on his cheek, turning his head so they were staring into each other's eyes. "Thank you. You don't know how important your support has been."

Tommy leaned down- he was about 6, maybe 7 inches taller than she was- and pressed his lips against hers as his hands curved around her waist, drawing her into a tender kiss. After a moment, he pulled back, still smiling.

"You are so very welcome. Listen, I know I can't, like, actually understand or anything, but I am here for you. It's just me and you against the whole goddamn world, okay? You and

me.”

He was right, it was going to be the two of them, together, never letting anything separate them. They already spent all of their time together, getting married was just putting it on paper. They could face anything if they were together, she just knew it. They worked so well, the two of them. And it was just going to be the two of them, too, they weren't having kids, after all, too much of a complication, too much responsibility. Aria knew she only ever wanted to be responsible to Tommy, and him to her. So they had it all planned out. Perfect.

“You and me. Always.”

After about a minute- granted, the young woman did not know it was a minute and thought it had been but a few seconds- she stopped running, wildly grasping around for something on which she could steady herself. Her hand found a lamppost, and she clung to it as tightly as she could. In that moment, it was as if a switch had been flipped, and the emotions she had been holding in flooded forward, along with the events of the day. They came in flashes- excitement, accompanied by giggling, powder and makeup brushes moving around, hair stylists curling and straightening. Joy, the second her adoptive mother walked in the room and had seen her in that gorgeous white dress, saying that she had never looked more beautiful. Anticipation, being driven to the church, surrounded by her closest friends. Nervousness, almost threatening to bubble up and over as the guests began to file in. Sheer terror as she stared at the sign propped up near the door, as she held her father's arm, just before walking down the aisle. It was the sign

that did it. Sitting there, elegant and bold, screaming “Welcome to our wedding celebration: Aria and Thomas”, not caring who saw it. It was too much, just too much. That was the first time she ran that day.

She ran first down to the bridal party room and grabbed her sister’s car keys out of her purse, then out of the church, down to the parking lot, and got in the car, driving away just as people started to make their way out of the church with bewildered expressions on their faces. She couldn’t stand to look at them. Not then. She drove about twenty minutes down the road and stumbled into her hotel, then to her room, finally throwing herself onto the bed. She sat there and cried, hysterical and breathless, unsure of how to feel, what to think, and least of all what to do. Hours passed; she hadn’t for a second questioned why no one had come to check on her. Until the clock beeped signaling 7:30 pm. She assumed they didn’t want to overwhelm her, however it was mostly due to an accident that had occurred one street over, causing a massive amount of traffic.

Aria stood clutching that lamppost, shivering against the damp air, her thoughts a tangled mess of disbelief, shame, and relief as the night’s events rolled through her mind. Without thinking, her hand went to her stomach, clutching at it in a manner that may have seemed strange if anyone had been around, seeing as she seemed almost to claw at it, as if to rip herself apart at the core of her existence. Her mind played another trick on her, causing Tommy’s voice to ring in her ears.

One Hour Earlier

“You- you’re- what?”

She took another breath, similar to the one she had taken just before opening the door after listening to the banging and desperately worried shouting going on outside. Her stomach was turning, her head was spinning, and usually, when she looked into her Tommy’s eyes, all of that went away. Usually it grounded her, made her feel solid and secure and safe. Now all it did was make the turning that much more violent and she tried to suck in enough air to say the word again without collapsing. She had worked on this with her therapist, what to do, but after that first session, it seemed as though things were just getting harder, not better- she was told it was normal, but right now it just felt like shit.

“Pregnant, Tommy. I’m- I’m pregnant.” Aria barely got the words out between her sobs, barely formed them in her mind. She had known for a while, but she hadn’t said anything. Maybe this was why it was so much worse.

“Why- what did- I mean-” Tommy’s voice broke. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

Why? Why? Of course he had to know why, didn’t he? What did he mean, why?

“I... I couldn’t. You, you said, we agreed, we didn’t want- we agreed-” Aria choked out. How could this have happened, this couldn’t be happening, how could this have happened? She knew they didn’t want kids, it was supposed to be just them, just the two of them. Always.

“I mean, you, you were taking the pill, we were careful, I just don’t understand.

At those words, her heart crashed down further than she had thought possible, and a fresh flood of tears came to her eyes. Of course he didn’t want it, she didn’t want it, it was wrong, how could this have happened? And how could he love her after this? Her body had betrayed them, beating the odds of both birth control and condoms, and as a result, she had betrayed them. Tommy had been through so much with her. He had stood by her, had supported her. And things were going well. Why did she have to fuck it up, why?

It didn’t matter in the least that Tommy tried to speak. It didn’t matter to her that he was trying to say something. It didn’t matter that in his mind, this wasn’t the awful thing she was imagining, this was good, this could be perfect, this was right. That he was happy, he was excited, he couldn’t wait to share another part of life with her, couldn’t she see that. No, those thoughts never got to be said, never got to be spoken, as Aria wouldn’t have heard them anyways, wouldn’t have listened, couldn’t have listened.

There it was, the unmistakable feeling of her stomach churning, her thoughts spinning, her pulse racing, and her head pushing against her skull, threatening to break out. Of course, of course, now was the perfect time to have another panic attack, now was perfect, just perfect. And it wasn't like Tommy would understand, he didn't feel that way, he didn't get them, it wasn't the same, she couldn't talk to him, couldn't tell him, he couldn't help her. And it wasn't like she could talk to her family, her dad never had understood, had never gotten what it was like, to feel so panicked all the time, so anxious, same with her adopted mom. And real mom was long gone, she had run, left, run away.

That was when Aria ran the second time, and it was each of those footfalls that brought her to the older part of town that she now found herself in, surrounded by buildings whose age showed- even though it oddly gave them more charm- and old-time lampposts, and foreboding, dark mist that couldn't possibly make her feel any worse- but had certainly tried.

His words replayed again and again and again and again, and time slipped by, not caring the effect it had. Ten minutes turned into thirty, which turned into an hour. Before that hour could turn into two, however, she was up yet again, running yet again. After a few blocks, however, her eyesight was completely impaired, as she had reached the end of the cluster of shops and assorted houses that outlined the edge of her hometown. It didn't stop her, however. She continued to run, trusting her feet, not bothering to even open her eyes because there was no light to reflect off of them anyways, what with the moon being safely hidden behind as many clouds as the atmosphere could muster. She ran, wincing as the increasingly rocky road left

imprints, scrapes, and even cuts on her feet, but not daring to stop, lest her memories and feelings catch up with her once again. If she stopped, that feeling of dread and panic would catch up with her, making her stomach and head and body ache with pain and anxiety.

It was at this time that her ears played tricks on her, almost convincing her twice that someone was running behind her, calling out to her, begging her to stop to turn around. But every time she did, she heard no one and saw nothing. So she ran, and ignored any small crunch of gravel she heard, every call, every-

The car horns deafening honk tore through the silence, and then there was black.

Aria's eyes peeled themselves open, slowly letting the light of a car's headlights come into focus, the only pinpoints of light anywhere that she could see. Her brain fumbled over the event that had just occurred. She hadn't realized it was a car coming, hadn't known that they had not seen her, had not realized she was in the way, and somehow hadn't realized that she had been hit until blinking her eyes open. Perhaps she had gone through too much pain already today, and her body had simply turned her numb, ignoring any additional assault and filing the pain away into, "deal with later". Wait, maybe she was in pain, her head felt a little fuzzy, and her limbs didn't feel quite as- present? It was like they were there, but didn't feel quite as connected to her as they had a few moments before. Actually, most of her felt like that. But she could move, and she checked, slowly rolling over and using her arms to push herself up, not bothering to dust off

her already dirtied dress. However, she did notice that she had scrapes and cuts all over her arms now, some deeper than others, all bleeding. Maybe that was why she felt so numb, because she was so overloaded with pain. Who knows. What she did know was that her sense of hearing was perfectly normal, which was why she caught the strangled gasp that came from next to the car behind her.

Before turning around, Aria gathered herself. What would she say? She was sorry for being out in the middle of the road, she hadn't meant to be, she was so sorry for the inconvenience and the trouble. With that, she whipped around, and her breath caught, because there was Tommy, standing next to the car in his tux, a look of panic on his face.

A calm spread through Aria then, the kind of calm she usually felt when she looked at Tommy, and in that second her hurt evaporated. It was simply and completely gone. Tommy was here, her Tommy was here. She was going to apologize, he was going to cry, they were going to talk about the baby, they were going to realize that they were going to be okay. They would have to apologize to all of the wedding guests and tell them that the ceremony would proceed the next day, not to worry. And it was all going to be perfect because this time she was never letting Tommy out of her sight, not again. She stepped forward, one step, then two, and that's when his feet moved too, taking a single step in her direction, then abandoning his reserve, running towards her. Aria didn't know when she had started running, but she was, she was running then, and he was there and they were mere inches apart.

And then Tommy ran right through her.

Aria gasped, shivering at the sensation, and a new feeling of dread rooted itself in her. Slowly, Aria turned, her steps unsure and terrified, terrified at what she would see, what she could see. And when she caught her first glimpse at the body Tommy was cradling in her arms, the calm lost its grip on her, and she fell to the ground, screaming, crying shrieking at the mass of bloodied flesh and protruding bone, all wrapped in the soiled and tarnished remains of her once beautiful wedding dress. Her blonde hair was caked with dirt and looked far darker than she had ever seen it. It must have been the sight of her hair, outlining her broken face, and the way that Tommy tucked it behind her ear in between gut wrenching sobs that pushed her over the edge yet again. It was so much, too much, she was gone, she was, just... gone.

Before she could think about it fully, before she could process what it would mean for Tommy, for her sisters, for her parents, for the friends she had grown to love and care for, for her unborn child, before any of that, she turned again, and, for the third and final time, she began to run, towards- well, everything. The realization that she and Tommy could have been happy. The hope that she could find peace.

That was her goal, right? To find peace? It was in that moment that Aria saw her life, watched every heartbreaking moment, felt every heartstring tug of joy, embraced every inch of

what had been. And then she noticed. The way she would frown after every picture, unsure of the commitment to history she had made, the way that each morning began with a pit in her stomach, a pit that enjoyed reminding her all day how to fail, what would happen if she did, and who she would let down. The way her eyes lost their sparkle, the way she cried every night that last month. It was incredible- for all of a sudden, Aria saw clearly her own mind and the twists and turns and scars and bandages that made it up. She could have been happy, she could have had a life, she saw that now, but with it she saw all of the things she knew she would never have seen until the moment of her death. So on she ran, away from life, towards- everything.

Chapter 4

Four Letters

Acceleration.

The rate of change of velocity per unit of time.

I momentarily put down the sparkly orange pen that I'd been tightly gripping for the past half hour and shook my wrist slightly. Sometimes I wrote so fast and pushed too hard with my wrist, making the muscles cramp and ache. It was my own fault I never learned how to type very fast- computer class was the only one I consistently made an effort to get out of in middle school. So while everyone around me was easily typing away, able to keep up with the teacher, I had to resort to pen and paper if I had any hope of committing everything to memory. Like I was frickin medieval or something. And I couldn't have taken a break, there were a shit ton of notes- it was AP Physics, after all- I had to live up to the exceedingly high expectations the college board decided to hold us to on the final exam.

Today marked the official second day of me at my new school, four weeks later than everyone else. Which meant most of the teachers were getting over their momentary lapse that caused them to forget what overbearing hard asses they actually were- the face they put on when the principal introduced me to them was a thin facade. Long gone was the act where they pretended they cared about me fitting in, getting to know people even though I was the new

student a few weeks into the semester. Let's be real, no one knew me, and the fact that I came to this new place at the beginning of junior year meant no one was going to bother to try to get to know me. Whatever. I was used to new schools. I needed this school to be something more than a school for me. I needed this building to be another chance, cause I'm not sure I had it in me to let this be another failure. I had spent so many first days in all sorts of special schools, in places that had to come with entire health wings for students who were struggling that day. Those kinds of places constantly created a barrier in my head between myself and normal, though. My mother had tried homeschooling me, paying tutors to come who knew about my "condition". I finally had told her I was sick of it, I wanted to at least try, she could give me that, right? A try to be normal? Hence, sitting in this less than pristine public school classroom, learning about acceleration from a woman who seemed to be purposefully refraining from accelerating through the boring parts of this lesson.

If there was any class I needed review in, though, this was it. Science was never really my forte, but I somehow got roped into AP because *someone* (*cough* my mother *cough*) thought it would look good on college applications, especially this being my junior year. I increasingly started hearing from people about how important it was for things to look good on college applications. Part of me just really wanted to introduce sparkly pens to those people. They always make my notes look good, anyway. But I digress.

Mrs. Eville had just clicked play on a short video that gave real life examples of acceleration, so I felt pretty safe tuning out and getting some of my religion homework done. It

was comparatively easier than physics- my dad had been a pastor his whole life, and I had been going to Christian schools all of mine. He used to help me with my religion homework, actually, until I told him I didn't need help.

Kinda wish I had just let him help. I missed it now, that extra hour of time we spent together every weekday.

Mrs. Eville's video had ended, meaning the lights got flicked back on and we were each instructed to come up to the front to grab a stopwatch because we were about to do a mini lab. And yeah, again, I know what you're all thinking- a stopwatch? You can just get that on your phone. And true- but phones were not allowed inside the building on a school day. Thank you private school rules. I pushed my chair back, flinching slightly at the loud screech. Then it was a matter of excuse-me-ing my way up to the front to grab my stopwatch and the worksheet I assumed we were supposed to get- I wasn't paying enough attention when the video ended to hear any instructions other than get the stopwatch, but since everyone else that had come up had grabbed a paper, I figured it was a safe bet. I returned to my seat, reading over the paper as I went.

The idea of acceleration, put simply, is this. If another force acts upon an object in motion, a force that is greater than the current force causing the object to move, the speed of the object will increase. So, to demonstrate this, we were going to roll ten differently colored

marbles down a ramp. The ramp had labeled checkpoints at evenly spaced spots down its smooth wooden surface. The class had just split up into groups- via a small number in the upper right hand corner of our handout- that would tell us which marble we should be watching and at which checkpoint we were supposed to click our stopwatch when the marble had rolled to it. Simple enough. Then through collaboration we were supposed to determine the rate of acceleration. Perfect.

My dad was the one I used to complain to about group activities. He knew I hated them, hated being forced to work with people that were trying a lot less hard than I was. He understood that.

I had been given the red marble and the first checkpoint. So I shifted around in my seat and waited as everyone moved to see the ramp better, which would allow us to start. I was kind of hoping this was all we were doing today. I had done an online version of this experiment last year, so I knew how to do it, I just didn't get to view the actual event. Nonetheless, if this was our only assignment, maybe I could get out early and head over to the library for a bit. Couldn't hurt.

Finally everyone could see and had figured out how to work their stopwatches- my dad would be having a field day if I told him how long it took some people to figure out how to push a button- so Mrs. Eville started to count down.

“Three!”

I blinked quickly. For some reason my heart had leapt.

“Two!”

It happened again. No. Oh my god, no. Shit.

“One!”

I knew what was about to happen, but it was too late, it was happening. The marbles were rolling, and one by one the beeps started going off around the room as people hit buttons. Again and again, beeps pulsating and ringing in my ears. My breathing got shorter and faster, and it felt like someone had just stepped on my chest, making all of the air shoot out in one swift motion. My head was swimming at this point, and I tried to stand up, pushing my chair back, but I felt dizzy, I couldn't actually see completely straight. Shit.

And then the marbles hit the ground, one after another, making harsh, sharp sounds as they hit the floor and bounced. Each one was loud and rang in my ears as they kept coming, each one following right on the heels of the last, hitting the ground, pelleting the tiles.

Rat tat tat tat tat tat TAT TAT TAT.

And all of a sudden it wasn't just the clinking noise, but that distinct whining noise that only comes from one thing, little pieces of metal flying by, ricocheting off of the walls, the ground.

I was there. I was in that sanctuary all over again. I was fourteen years old, sitting by myself in the front pew, frozen in shock as bullets whizzed past me, embedding themselves in the pulpit, the lectern, even shattering the fragile pipes on the organ up front. There were screams, people were getting up, pushing, and still the guns kept firing, again and again, round after round. If it had been any other Sunday, my mom would have been sitting next to me, but she had been sick, had decided to stay home. So for that day it was just me and my dad- my dad. I looked up, I saw him, he was looking at me, his face a mask of fear as he yelled at me, shouting for me to run, get out, GET OUT. I couldn't move, though. I just stared in shock up at him, then found my eyes being drawn to the back of the sanctuary.

There they were. Two of them- they looked like men because of their build, both wearing jeans, one in a faded blue flannel that hung open against a gray t-shirt. The other was wearing a dark green hoodie, but with the hood down. It's funny what details stick. Neither of them were hiding their faces. They were yelling, yelling about something, but I couldn't hear them. All I

could hear were the guns, steadily pouring out more bullets as people tried to leave, to get away, any way they could. Tried to run.

I remember. I looked at him. I looked at my dad, I was crying now, tears streaming down my face because I didn't know what to do, because I still couldn't move, couldn't force myself out of my spot. I saw him, he was coming now, he had left the pulpit and was sprinting towards me, he was halfway there.

And the next seconds happened in slow motion. His face suddenly contorted, shifting so quickly from fear to pain, and he fell, the force of the bullet knocking him sideways, making him smack into the piano that had before stood so grandly at the front of the sanctuary but was now riddled with holes. Him hitting that piano, that's what made me move, what forced me up, made me run, through the pews, ducking down as close to the ground as I could to avoid being seen, towards the hidden door in the back used only by janitors and people who spent too much time in the church. I burst through the doors, the light from outside blinding me as I was quickly grabbed and rushed away by another member of the congregation.

I wonder all the time how I got out when so many didn't. Maybe they didn't see me because I was small, or because someone had pulled the fire alarm, distracting them. Or maybe I got lucky. I didn't feel lucky.

And then it was over, I could see, it wasn't the light from outside that blinded me, but someone's flashlight from their phone they weren't supposed to have. I guess they had thought it was a good idea to shine it directly in my eyes. I knew I couldn't have been out for long- past episodes had taught me this- but there had evidently been enough time when I was out for Mrs. Eville as well as the entire class to crowd around me, even though I now could hear clearly enough to make out that Mrs. Eville was yelling at people to get back. I was staring up at the ceiling, so I guess I had fallen flat on the floor. But I never really knew what happened during an episode.

Shit. I was fine, really, I started to sit up, to show them I was perfectly fine, there was nothing to worry about. Mrs. Eville immediately made me lie back down with a forceful hand.

"You're okay, sweetheart, you're okay, someone ran to get the nurse, just lie down, you're okay-"

I cut her off.

"No, I'm fine, I just-" I started to try to push myself up again. I suppose the slight slur in my voice wasn't super convincing, though, seeing as once again my attempt was thwarted by her surprisingly firm hand- it was only then that I realized how wrinkled that hand was, as it guided my shoulders back to the floor.

“No, honey, you need to lie down, the nurse’s on her way.” The way she was repeating herself, it seemed like she was trying to convince herself more than me. Moments later the nurse arrived with a wheelchair, and as much as I protested, I was helped into it and wheeled away to the nurse’s office.

The nurse read through my file that she apparently hadn’t gotten around to yet, realized my “condition” or whatever. Then the principal came in and had a hushed conversation behind a partly closed door which consisted of quite a few inclusions of “why wasn’t I told-” and “how could-” and “notify immediately-” and used those letters a lot. I hated saying them together in that order. It was like, those letters weren’t supposed to be for me, they were for soldiers, or whatever. I don’t know. Just anyone but me. I’m 16, after all, it doesn’t feel fair that I have such a serious label. I figured that by the next day, all of my teachers would be looking at me differently, and a lot of my classmates, too. But I didn’t really have much of a say in that, any more than how often those four simple letters were used when it came to my episodes.

Mom came to pick me up. She walked in with her kind eyes and her slight smile that held a world of understanding, and I melted into her arms and her warmth and the comfort that she brought me. On my way out the door, I heard the principal telling my mom I could take all the time I needed, that she was so sorry for what had occurred, they would be much more vigilant in making sure I was never triggered again- like they could promise that. My mother replied as she

had for the past two years, saying that I was fine, the episode wasn't anybody's fault. She knew how to handle situations like these, she was good in a crisis. My dad had been, too. Then she promised, at the principal's request, that she would let them know how I was doing.

The answer to that? Honestly, I was fine. I was mad at myself, actually, if anything. Like, Mrs. Eville shouldn't be attributed any fault, she didn't know, really none of this was anyone's fault, at least not anyone at that school. It was fine. I was fine. I dreaded the looks I would now get in the hallways, but I could live with those sideways glances. I had to live with them. But like the memories, like the flashbacks? They had a habit of coming back.

Chapter 5

Mindless

The Keurig machine was making that buzzing sound again, forcing itself into the conversation that was happening at the dining room table not five feet away. It was just Harper and Ben, just the two of them, but that didn't stop the voices from carrying a certain amount of weight. How could there not be, with that little stick sitting there on that napkin, the blue plus sign in the window of it a glaring reminder of the severity of what was going on. Their voices were carrying into the apartment above them, making their way to the ready ears of the Harrisons, who could always be counted on to pry where they weren't welcome, who, unbeknownst to the couple in that dining room, would be "accidentally" running into them on the stairs and mentioning something that would force the couple to disclose this new piece of information, perhaps in more depth. But that was yet to come.

At the moment, Ben's voice was dominating that small communal dining space, overly crammed with wicker furniture and baskets that the couple had received as presents from Ben's mom- she thought they liked them, and was convinced they treasured each one. Most of the time, the baskets were at least in the back of Harper's mind as she noted their overwhelming presence every time she entered the room, but today they were forgotten as the tone of the room grew more and more desperate.

“We can’t, you know that, you know that we can’t, I just got put in charge of the Changeview project, that’s going to take three years at least, you aren’t even working”- Harper flinched visibly, he knew that was a sore point for her. To be fair, he had thought about it before he said it, but it didn’t help. “And what if something goes wrong again?”

And there it was, tugging at her subconscious, a small prickle in the back of her skull, attempting to reach through. It wanted her to remember, it was begging her to remember, to relive every moment that she has forced down, forced away. So she fought. One metaphorical army against the other, tangled together, trying desperately to force the other down, to become the most forefront and present thing in Harper’s mind. One won, memories of tears streaking down her face pulled to the front of her mind. The lips of the doctor, moving but not connecting, the words reverberating inside of her- “unfortunate”, “everything they could”, and eventually “stillborn”. The doors of the hospital, bursting open after a small shove from her still shaking hands, and the sound that she had supposed had come from her, a sound that somehow blended with the wail of the ambulances that were somehow ever present in her mind, to this day, to this moment, here, staring at that stick, sinking into the fullness of her memory. Trapped in her mind, the thoughts and feelings spreading over her, sinking into her, washing all of her senses until they are simply numb.

“Harper? Are you even- Jesus Christ, I can’t even fucking talk to you.” Ben took a step back and spun on his heel to face the wall, making conscious effort to not slam a fist through the

plaster. Hadn't he just talked to his therapist about control? Maybe Harper could use some of that advice, as she was still sitting there, her face a mask while she was trapped in her memories.

"Forget it, I can't keep doing this with you." He threw the last words over his shoulder as he made his way around the corner and towards the closet, from which he retrieved his long black dress coat. He pulled on one sleeve and then another, all the while struggling to keep his breathing steady. And while he didn't say it, his last thought hung in the door before he stormed out.

Deal with your fucked up mind shit on your own, let me know when you're done.

On your own. That's what she was, wasn't she? On her own. Everything had changed, every minute of every day since that day at the hospital. Every day it felt like something new shifted, something inside of her broke and shattered more and more, as if a fucking pebble had hit her windshield and every day the crack widened just another inch. It was change, always change, things were shifting and moving and her mind and body alike could never catch up. As the days had stretched longer and longer into weeks and months, she could feel herself getting farther from the Harper she had once been. Before? "What if" was a daring phrase, something to be said with a smile and a devilish look before hurtling across the grocery store to sing "Somebody to Love" from atop the cashier counter. Now it meant what if everything changed

again, what if she broke more, and what if this time she couldn't fix it. It was easier to sit here, still and stoic, so that no part of her could crack or break ever again.

Chapter 6

Cheetos

The sea of people sitting in that arena made me want to puke. I had already been biting my nails down to stubs for the past week, plus I had painted my nails last night for the very reason of stopping myself from going any further with that bad habit, which consistently made a point of surfacing no matter how hard I tried to suppress the urge. That and eating. I once was so nervous before a performance that I almost ate my weight in Cheetos. I accidentally stained my hands orange, and my cheer captain yelled at me so bad, I made my dad swear to never buy me Cheetos again. Even though I still loved them and regretted my choice every time I walked by a vending machine, I was too nervous about having a repeat of the incident.

But in that moment, I'd have eaten anything I could get my hands on. My shaking, sweaty hands. Great. That's just great. That's exactly what I need before one of the biggest performances of my entire life. I mean, convocation means almost 10,000 people watching us. The Cheetos incident was when I performed in front of 500, so it's anyone's guess as to how well I am faring right now. I felt my fingers start to tap my leg involuntarily, and I knew I needed to stop staring at that audience. Now. I stepped back from the curtain that separated me from that crowd and let it fall before my stomach gave out and released its contents to the floor.

As I stepped back, I glanced down at my phone and wished for the hundredth time that day that I had remembered to bring my earphones. My dad and I had a tradition we used to do together before every competition, performance, match, anything. There was a song, *Two Princes* by the Spin Doctors, and we loved to listen to it, any chance we got. So before any cheer event, in the car on the way over, we would put on that song and sing as loud as we could, being ridiculous because we could and because we were doing it together. Music is like our thing, you could say, something we share. It has been almost two years since I've jammed out to that song with him, though, he's been so busy. I still listen to the song. I guess not this time, though.

Listening to it alone wouldn't be the same anyway.

I quickly made my way back down the hallway that stretched from the arena floor to the room that had been allocated for my squad to leave our equipment in and to warm up. Pushing open the heavy wooden door, I was greeted by flashes of black and gold, Towson University's colors, shining from our cheer outfits. High ponytails whipped back and forth as girls warmed up with stretches and simplified versions of the routines. Everyone's makeup was done perfectly, and their hair was placed without a fault, which of course only made me question my own appearance. But essentially, by every definition of the word, we were ready for the performance. I mean, we had practiced every day for hours for the past three weeks, perfecting every combination and fixing every possible flaw. But I can tell you with complete honesty that did absolutely nothing to calm my mind, or my stomach.

I made my way through the group, ducking my head, nodding hi, and saying “excuse me” and “I’m sorry”, cringing internally as I heard my voice leave my body, small, meek, and pathetic, with way too much breathiness. I made my way to the back corner of the room where I had left my cheer bag. And sitting right next to it, making kissy-faces at her ever-present phone, was my best friend, Elena. There was a brief second when I saw her when my butterflies stopped their assault on my stomach, but unfortunately, that didn’t last. As I came over and sat down shakily, she turned to me, and her face, which had been beaming with excitement, turned to concerned understanding the second she laid eyes on me.

“Again?” she said with a sigh, shaking her head slightly. “You brought your meds, right?” I pulled out the small bottle of pills I kept in my bag for just such emergencies and shook it at her, as if to prove it was real. “Good, take. Them. Now.” I always had Propranolol in my bag, on hand. It calmed the physical symptoms of my attacks so I could concentrate more on controlling the psychological parts of them.

Elena had been my best friend since we were five years old, and she knew everything about me. Especially how important it was for her to not feed into my panic with the overly-sympathetic “oh my god, are you okaaaay?” that so many of the other girls always thought I wanted to hear. So many people didn’t get it, how you should talk to someone when they are having a moment, how one of the worst things you can do is over legitimize the feelings because

that just makes me get more caught up in them. I would be lying to say it has been easy to make friends because of that, but I have never needed a bunch of friends. A best friend is enough.

“Yeah, I know, I shoulda taken them earlier, I just-” I broke off with a quick breath. “I thought I could maybe, kinda, get though or something...” I trailed off at the end, mumbling, because her raised eyebrows and half smirk were right- I hadn’t ever made it without them before, I knew now wasn’t going to be my miracle breakthrough. Sometimes I thought she knew me too well.

I had barely taken the time to pop a few in my mouth and swallow them down with a gulp of water before Natalie, my team captain, was up in the front of the room, calling us over for our final pep talk. I got up slowly, taking a few deep breaths and shaking my hands as if I could shake my nerves out right then and there. Elena stopped me before I could start making my way over to where the squad was congregating and pulled me closer, her eyes asking the question before her mouth did.

“Your dad?”

I shook my head. I wasn’t surprised, to be honest. I mean, he is one of Johns Hopkins leading cardiologists, sometimes he gets busy, and it really wasn’t even uncommon for me to not

see him for days at a time, even when I was living at home. Now that I'm a sophomore at Towson, I see him even less. And I knew when I told him about the performance a few months ago that it was highly unlikely that he'd turn up for the event. He was busy, and I got that. It was just that we used to spend so much time together, and recently, it just felt like I was missing a part of myself, a part that was, I don't know, like, him, I guess. He had it too- anxiety- which meant he understood, more than my mom did, so he was always the one I would go to, the one who would talk me down. I wished yet again that he was here today to do that, because I was pretty sure I was going to need it.

"It's not even a big deal, really, I mean, my mom is watching the live stream, so it's fine, and I mean Chloe is a freshman this year, so she's watching, too. I just gotta make sure I get through this without falling on my ass." I said, faking a light laugh.

My mom had told me weeks ago that she couldn't make it, but I knew that. I mean, living in California means it isn't cheap to come to events and stuff, so I didn't blame her. She was still making an effort. And I knew my younger sister Chloe was watching from the stands as one of the newest members of the Towson family.

"Yeah, I know, but, Liv? You got this, 'kay? We got this." She pulled me in for a quick hug before pulling me along behind her to join the group huddle. I was kind of half listening, half in my own head, but I made it through to the end of our team chant and even made it through the

nerve-wrenching walk to the end of the hallway. We did our final pre-performance cheer, and raced onto the stage.

The performance went by in a blur. I remember my stomach refusing to stop churning, my smile hoping no one noticed it was fake, and my feet stumbling through the routine. I think I surfaced sometime in between my back handspring and our extension stunt. I was a back spotter for this particular one, so I stood in back in case our flyer, Sophie, took a spill. We did our counts, and then she was up, waving to the crowd and smiling from ear to ear. And then my heart stopped.

There were two things in that moment- the first, I really should have noticed, the second, I definitely wished I hadn't. The first was that one of the laces of Sophie's shoe had gotten hooked around the right thumb of her left spotter. Typically, my anxiety meant that I of course could notice those little details that other people miss- it's one of the positives to being this way. Instead what I noticed was the fact that there, in the fourth row on the left side of the stage, was my dad. He was here. Sitting there holding a red rose that I knew was for me, grinning like he was on top of the world.

It would have only taken me one more second to notice the shoe- I was usually a really good spotter. Seeing my dad, though? That took up that one second. And in that one second, they were already twisting her so that she could dismount, and her legs were already tangled, and her

eyes were already panicking, and she was already falling. I saw her coming towards me, and I remember thinking how it was so good she wasn't going to land on that hard, unforgiving stage, and then realizing that it was me that was going to reach impact, and then black as my head collided with the ground.

I woke up in the hospital. I honestly couldn't tell you how I had gotten there or how much later it was, because I have literally no clue. I was just aware of a few simple facts. The first was that my pillow was surprisingly uncomfortable, and was bunched under my neck in a very unpleasant way. The second was that I was way too warm under the blanket that they had laid over me, and I could tell without looking that my pit stains were growing by the second. And the third was that sitting in the chair right next to the bed, passed out with his mouth open, was my dad. And in his lap was a huge bag of Cheetos, and a card that said, "For my little girl".

I felt a smile spreading across my face, and I just sat there for a few moments, taking it in. I mean, he was here. With me. I knew he was busy, I knew he had important things to do, but he still was here. After a minute, I decided to try to wake him up.

"Dad? Dad? Daaad?" The last one was sing-song like. I didn't want to startle him, and honestly, I knew I should probably feel worse, but I felt okay, just a light headache. He slowly rocked his head to each side before blearily opening his eyes. The second he saw me awake,

though, he was wide awake, shifting forward quickly to sit on the edge of his seat as he looked at me with concerned eyes.

“Honey, hi! Hi, how are you? How do you feel?” I smiled even wider at the happiness in his voice.

“Mmmm, okay, I think. You get a nice nap?” I joked. I can’t explain it, but I always just felt more myself around my dad, more relaxed, because I knew we were one in the same. He laughed, his eyes crinkling at the edges.

“Yeah, yeah, well, come on, cut me some slack. You got to sleep through the night, I was up the whole time. Apparently, my daughter is a klutz.” he said. I laughed at that. It was true, when I wasn’t doing cheer, I was usually a total klutz, but I was so careful with routines.

“Man, she seems like such a dork.” I said, feigning sincerity. “So what are we looking at? Nothing’s broken, right?” I lifted my arms and moved my legs slightly, just to check. Everything felt normal.

“Nah, you’re in one piece. Just a concussion.” Ah, so that would explain the headache. My dad sat forward, his face becoming a little more serious. “What happened? Lose your balance?”

I thought for a second, unsure of how to answer. I mean, how could I tell him that it was because I had seen him in the crowd? How could I tell him that I was so surprised that I wasn't paying attention? He was going to think it was his fault, and it wasn't.

"I just- I guess I just wanted to make sure you could tell which one was me. You know, the clumsy cheerleader." He smiled at that and sat back in his chair, looking calm and content.

"Of course I could tell. It's you. I always know which one you are."

"Oh, right, I bet I stick out like a sore thumb." I giggled, carrying on the bit. My dad shook his head, a twinkle in his eyes.

"No. No, I know it's you- because you are the most beautiful one there. My little girl." I literally felt like I was going to burst from beaming so hard. How could I tell him how much it meant to see him there?

"Hey dad?"

"Yeah?"

“I love you.”

“I love you too, peanut.”

Chapter 7

Chapters

Chapter 1- Philip.

Others convinced me that you were safe. You were nice and kind of quiet, and after all you were interested in guys. I was young, though, I mean, I had never experienced the negative possibilities of intimacy, of men. So I guess that's the only thing I will ask you to keep in mind- this was all really new. I'm not even sure what else to say. Sometimes new things bring out the best in us, sometimes the worst. And sometimes new things just happen, and nothing gets brought out, nothing at all. Sometimes, however odd it might seem, some things happen that push feelings down further in us, just far enough that we aren't sure if they are ever coming back out.

Close your eyes.

Hear that? You have to, everyone does. The band director is yelling for everyone to sit down, be quiet for just one minute! Of course, no one is listening. But what did he expect, really? We're on a bus going to Disney World, for god's sake, and he made the really poor decision to put the drumline, trumpets, low brass, and saxophones on the same bus. If there was a hierarchy for the loudest and most obnoxious sections in the marching band, those four would be at the top

of the list- in that order. It's asking for trouble, and he knows it. Of course, you and I aren't bothered, are we Philip? None of the students are, why would we be? We're with sixty of our closest friends, and there are way more upperclassmen than underclassmen, and they're so good about taking us under their wing and making us feel comfortable around them. And we are- relaxed, excited, full of anticipation. It's not every day we get to perform at Disney. You feel it, too, I know you do. After all, you are talking more than I have ever heard you talk, and we're friends, so I am definitely used to hearing you talk. A lot. My only complaint is the air- you can taste the adrenaline... and the sweat, the spilled soda and the Cheeto dust, but it's not nearly enough to break the high you and I and everyone else on that bus are on.

It only takes about an hour for us all to settle in and move around in our non-assigned seats. After we find our cliques and start to get friendly with the people sitting around us, the games come out. We all know we are going to be on this bus for, like, two full days. So we all brought games, we all are prepared. I bring Phase 10 out of my backpack, and you bring out your speaker, because music is a must. We are sitting next to each other, and I think this is the first time that I actually comment to you on how cute that trombone player is, sitting a few rows in front of us. It isn't for my benefit, obviously; he's not my type. But I'm pretty sure he is totally yours. Your off handed agreement simply makes me smirk- you're clearly shy, that's why you react that way, duh.

Phase 10 gets boring fast, and you're now suggesting why don't we play Cards Against Humanity- after all, there's a game going on right next to us. I am agreeing, saying it could be a

lot of fun, and then you are turning to a girl I don't know and asking for cards for both of us. I think that the next few moments are defining for us, don't you? Because I say I can't see very well, but I'm not upset, I just keep having to ask you what the cards say, and you respond that we can share a seat so I can see. I say that there isn't enough room, and I laugh a little, and you mention that I can just sit on your lap, no problem. It's a good idea, I'm pretty small, and I would be able to see better. So I do. And I notice how at least three of the girls playing the game look at me out of the corner of their eye, eyebrows raised, and I hear an "oo-ooh!!" escape someone's mouth. I think it's ridiculous, come on, don't they all know you're not even into girls? It's perfectly normal, isn't it, like, a friend helping another out. It's so dumb, high school shit. Stupid, stupid high school shit. Like, I get that I'm not exactly the leading authority on social situations, but even I realize they are just stupid. You, Philip, are laughing it off, after all, smiling at them in a suggestive way, making it clear that you are taking this as a joke, and are feeding into their drama because what else can you do.

I truly don't even remember the rest of the day. We played games, we ate, we stopped for a bathroom break, I don't really know, it's not important. What is important is that night. You know it was important, right? You should. I mean, that night I'm sitting next to a friend, George, I guess a mutual friend, more mine than yours. And you're texting me, because you want to chat and don't want to sleep yet, and I am too excited to sleep, so I say to come on back to our seat, it'll be fine. See us on the bench near the back? The three of us are easily able to fit between the two seats, me in the middle, and you in the end seat. Do you remember what we talked about? Do you remember if my friend was in the conversation? I don't; it wasn't important, not then. It

only became important when I said I was tired, and I put my head on your shoulder to be funny. And then you put your hand somewhere it had no business being.

Do you feel me tensing up? Do you realize that at that moment, a million things are running through my mind, a million different scenarios, a million different thoughts? I'm thinking about the reaction when I sat on your lap, and your reaction when I mentioned that trombone player. And all of a sudden I feel so stupid, because obviously you aren't into guys, or at least not entirely. I found that out later, of course, but that was the moment that my head made the all too important connection I had missed. Did you know that I thought you were gay? If you did, you had to know that changed how I acted around you. I was more comfortable with physical interaction with you because of it. But I guess you either don't realize or don't care. Then I'm thinking about your reaction with those other girls, the ones who were oohing and ogling when I sat on your lap, and how you smirked and- oh my god, you weren't kidding, you were serious, how did I miss that? How did I not get it- but then I never get stuff like that, do I. I never understand.

Literally none of that matters in this moment, because your hand is still there. It is still on my chest, and I really do not want it there. And then you move your hand and I feel a wash of relief, immediately followed by a cold sinking as I'm realizing you simply are moving your hand to get a better vantage. Why? I literally can not move if I wanted to. I do want to. But I have no idea what to do, I'm just- shock. That's all. Shock. I'm positive my heart rate is speeding up, and

I'm positive you feel it, you have to, considering the current placement of your fingers. Did you think it was for another reason? It wasn't.

This moment is stretching on into seconds, into minutes, into what seems like forever. And I'm still trying to move. Trying to say something. I swear to god I am. But I literally think that my body has shut down entirely. And the second you get up to go to the bathroom, I crumble. You don't know this, but I am turning to my friend, burying myself into his shoulder, and whispering to him. I'm saying, don't let him come back. Please. Don't let him come back. Pretend I'm asleep. I have no idea if he is hearing me, no idea, but I do know that when you come back from the bathroom, I am sitting still as anything, eyes closed, feigning sleep as well as I can. You don't know this, but I am listening to the conversation you are having. You want to sit back down, to keep sitting with me. My friend is saying I am asleep, and you should go back to your seat. You barely argue, maybe you are tired. Maybe you realize that everything has just changed. And not for the better.

For the rest of that trip, I made sure that I was never with you. We had plans to get lunch. I "forgot". I stayed so close to my friend that had told you to go away, I must have been annoying. But I truly didn't know what else to do. I talked to one of my other friends, and she said that she had seen me sit on your lap and thought we were a thing. Did you think that? Maybe that's why I didn't tell the director. Maybe it wasn't your fault, maybe I had led you on, I probably had. Is that what you felt like? Maybe. It was probably my fault.

I didn't say anything. For three years I didn't say anything. The only reason I ever said something was because you did something to my friend and then another. Katie and Samin, they were worth speaking up for, worth telling the guidance counselor what had happened to me. I care about my friends more than anything else in the entire world. Did you know it wasn't for me? I didn't do it for me. I wouldn't have. But she is important enough. It didn't matter anyways. They didn't believe me- guidance, my teacher, my parents, they didn't believe us, so it didn't really matter. Maybe guidance did, but they said they couldn't do anything because it was outside of state lines, I think we were in Virginia at the time. So it really doesn't even matter.

Well, I guess it kind of mattered to me. But not to you. You never talked to me again after the day I went to the adults.

What stuck with me all these years isn't the actual bullshit you pulled, touching me when I didn't want you to. It is the unfortunate and terrifying truth that a touch doesn't hold the same meaning for me anymore. And I haven't reached the point where I am ready to say that my problems with physical intimacy come from you, because that gives you too much power. That meaning behind an intimate touch that I am told is important? How you're supposed to feel something, maybe in your gut or your heart when someone touches your cheek tenderly? I don't feel that. Maybe that's why other touches that weren't invited by me seem more permissible. I think that feeling of importance that is associated with intimate touch was buried so deep when

you touched me, and I am not sure how deep I have to go to dig it back out. At that point I think I question if it's even worth it to dig that deep, and I wonder how much more damage digging would cause. Open your eyes, Philip.

Chapter 2- Will.

There are moments when we wish the people in our lives that know us best don't know us as much as they do. Best friends, parents, trusted adults- they know us better than we think, and that means they usually know what's best for us. Of course, that doesn't stop us from fighting them every chance we get, defying them all through our youth, only rarely taking a step back to acknowledge that they were right. The ones I'm referring to currently are my parents, specifically my mom. And thank god she never rubbed it in my face, saying I told you so or something like that, because I may have punched her. But you know what? She was right about you. This is your piece in the puzzle of my life, Will- enjoy.

Close your eyes.

You won't give it back, I have explained to you, again and again, in a hushed voice, because everyone else is asleep, I can't go to sleep without it, I have to hold my bear, it's a lame necessity! We are stifling our laughs. You know we need to sleep, I know you do. We do this lock in at our church every year, and every time we don't get enough sleep, we have a miserable choral performance the next day. It's tried and true- sleep means the parents will be proud and the pastor will tell us we did a good job, and the congregation will "surprise" us with a cake in the parlor after the service. So we need to make sure we don't wake anyone up, and we need to be quiet, so give me back my bear, Will! It's so hard to pretend that I'm mad at you, though, with your quirky grin and the way your eyes squint up every time you smile, which is literally all the

time. You are always making jokes and laughing. Can you tell that it gives me butterflies? I'm not subtle, you must have seen me glance over at you during choir practice one too many times. Maybe you do, maybe you don't. But did you mean to do that just now? Did you mean to, as I was trying to get my bear back from you, grab my hand? And hold it?

You literally must know what you're doing because you're still holding my hand. Why are you choosing to give the bear back now? And why are you still holding my hand? I'm not complaining, absolutely not- your hand in mine has guaranteed the smile that is on my face will stay put. I have no intention of letting go if you don't. I guess you don't either, because that's how we fall asleep- holding hands.

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It's been weeks since we held hands during that lock in, and consistently, without fail, we have met in our secret stairwell to hold hands and hug each other and look at each other. That's all we do, just hold hands and hug. Are you shaking? Sometimes when we are hugging, I think I can feel you shaking a little, and to me it meant you were holding me tight and weren't planning on letting go. I needed that. This particular Sunday- because we only get to see each other on Sundays- you're telling me that your birthday is next week. Happy early birthday. Wait. Do you hear that? You do, and we spring apart just in time as a member of the congregation passes by, blissfully ignorant, and it makes us smile. It's our secret, right? That's what makes it fun.

After all, my mom somehow had an idea, or at least I think she did. She had spent the entire ride to church telling me how I better not have a crush on you because she didn't like you, she didn't trust you, did you know that? I can't imagine, because I would never tell you that. So a secret it is.

But your birthday is not a secret. Neither is what you want. I know you want me to kiss you. I know that. You remember when I told you I had never been kissed? You must. I can't help it, I'm nervous. But of course I am, I mean, it's your birthday present, and I've never done it before. What if it's a crappy present? What if you don't like it and you get mad at me? I'm being ridiculous. But still. I just want you to be happy, and if this will make you happy, I should do it, right?

It turns out I don't need to be nervous. Because here we are, on your birthday, in our little stairwell, and your tongue is down my throat. And it's disgusting. You clearly have no idea what you're doing, and even I can tell that this isn't right. But it's your birthday, I'm not about to say anything, of course not, that would be horrible of me. Do you care, though? I am pretty sure you don't, because we are pulling away and you are smiling like an idiot, an adorable idiot, don't get me wrong. So I am happy enough- because you are. At least for that next week. We decide that my mom is too close to figuring it out, that we should stop before she becomes the wiser, more than she already is, at least. But it's okay, we are still great friends, and maybe in the future.

What's that saying? And then the other shoe dropped? The week after we ended our meager one month relationship, and you're texting me, telling me you are sad. So I say meet in our stairwell, tell me what's wrong- you know, as friends. So we do, and you are clearly sad. I've never seen you like this, are you okay? What happened? Do you see how much concern and caring is in my voice? I am worried now. And then you tell me. Your girlfriend of three months just broke up with you.

Your girlfriend. Of three months. After we ended things just last week, after being a couple for a month. My stomach is churning, and my chest hurts. But I'm nodding, and I'm wearing a sympathetic look, hoping you won't notice it's a facade. Then I pretend my mom is looking for me, that I got a text from her and I have to go, so I do. The service is still going on, so I go out to the prayer garden. And there is literally nothing I can do to stop the tears because it hurts. It hurts that you were with someone, that you didn't mention it to me before, and that you decided to tell me in that way. Why? Why did you do that? Then the other questions came, the ones that it took a lot longer to get rid of. What did I do? I wasn't enough, so what did I not do right? What did I get wrong? I feel so bad, and it hurts, and I keep coming back to the same goddamn thing- my mom was right about you.

Or maybe this is on me, maybe I messed it up again. Maybe I saw things wrong, I was wrong with Philip, wasn't I? I missed something big, so maybe I did that again, maybe I did that

again here.

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We have barely spoken in months, but you sent me that text just a few moments ago. Why did you send that text? Saying you're sorry, that you didn't deserve me, that you still care about me, that you love me? Why now? What- why? And why am I responding that it's okay? I know why. It's because I am not sure if it was my fault or yours, and I still care about you, of course I do. It's high school, I could be convinced I care about a cockroach. So we decide to try again. You are promising me that you will do better, that you want to deserve me, that you know how much what you did hurt, and that you will never hurt me again. I think it's okay to believe you, other people believe in you, and I've seen things like this happen in movies, and it always turns out right. So I believe you.

This one's on me. Because I took your word as gospel. And when your friend, my friend, our friend, Henry comes to me and tells me that he has seen you at school holding hands with another girl, laughing with another girl, kissing another girl, I don't know why my heart sinks again. I really should have expected it this time. Instead, I let my heart crack even more. And that's on me. Open your eyes, Will.

Chapter 3- Ryan.

It will always be my greatest flaw- the inability to determine who is worthy of my trust and how to discern if there should be a continuation of that mutual relationship. I make excuses, I play things off, and above all, I put on blinders when it comes to people I care about doing things that hurt me. But Ryan, I think you are the only chapter of my life that I don't question if it was my fault. Maybe with psychological traumas, it's easier to find the real culprit. I think that's what you taught me.

Close your eyes.

I met you years ago. You remember the day? Freshman year, English class, our teacher made us sit next to each other, in the very back row, both angling our bodies away from each other and purposefully avoiding eye contact to save ourselves from the full awkwardness of the assigned seat position. But we have become literally amazing friends. I mean, after I had a crush on you, and then you had a crush on me, and then I did, and you did, eventually we have just let it go and become friends. We even got through that really weird Valentine's day when you bought me flowers and chocolate and I didn't know how to react. And after all, you were there for me during the marching band trip and how painful that was, even though you didn't know what was wrong. I love you for that, truly I do. So I couldn't be happier that we were cast in this short film together. It means I get to spend a ton of time with you this summer working on what we both love to do. I don't even have to ask if you're excited- I know you are. Especially

because my birthday is one of the days we are filming, and I know that you know that. You asked Bella what kind of cake I like, after all.

You made me a whole chocolate cake. And I cannot believe that you remembered that I'm allergic to red dye, you looked for cake without red dye, and sprinkles, and icing? I am honestly speechless. I don't know what to say, or do, or even... feel. I just know that I never feel I have to conceal the parts of myself that make me feel insecure when I'm around you. The beauty of our platonic relationship is both new and enticing to me. We're past the whole back and forth liking each other thing, the cake and the present you got me are a friend thing. Bella was totally wrong when she said you did it because you liked me, that's just not true, you would have told me.

Feel that? The cold blast of air conditioning as we step inside the director's living room to see the final premiere of the film we worked on. And the barking that is steadily getting louder? A dog is bounding down the stairs towards me, and I'm laughing as it knocks me to the floor. I'm smiling up at you as I sit on the ground petting the dog, and you're smiling at me, and I feel a rush of emotion again, and I am realizing what it means. I think that's why I called you tonight. Where am I? In my garage, we can have more privacy in our conversation here. I am telling you that I miss you, that I kind of want to hang out with you more, a lot more, and then I'm not smiling anymore. Because you are telling me that this innocent surface level friendship that we share is all we will ever amount to. Why don't you want me anymore, did I do something wrong? Then you tell me I didn't do anything, that you are feeling the same thrilling trill in your

stomach like I do when I see you. If we both feel it, why are we not grabbing hold and running with it, together? I don't understand. You are saying it's because of you, it's your fault, and then our voices are raising and we are talking faster and I tell you I want to be with you and I hadn't realized it before, maybe I just didn't understand the intricacies of social interaction and what it meant when I felt the things I did around you-

Do you remember what you said? The exact words, not just the general idea. Regardless, let me remind you. I said I wanted to be with you, and you said we couldn't because you were protecting me. And I said what do you mean, who were you protecting me from. And you said yourself. Because, you said to me, because you had recently considered raping me.

And I can tell you with absolute certainty that I was staring at my reflection in the car window, that I was wearing a blue shirt, that there was dirt caked in the tires of the car, that I dropped the phone, and that I was the most scared that I have ever been in my entire life.

It wasn't feeling scared that earned you a chapter in this story. It's that I trusted you. You know I trusted you, right? You were my best friend. And I trusted you more than anyone. And that was what did it. That the one person I trusted more than anyone could be the one to scare me this much and cause me to stare at a pair of scissors that were sitting next to my bed for over an hour that night. Open your eyes, Ryan.

Chapter 4- Dylan.

You know how some people call things the beginning of the end? Well, this is your story, your chapter in my life, and that's exactly what you felt like- the beginning of my eventual end. When I picked you, how was I supposed to know, know what I was signing up for, saying yes to, accepting? Maybe I should have, I don't know. Nonetheless, strap in- this one always leaves me reeling.

Close your eyes.

Do you notice how nervous I am walking down those questionable wooden stairs that are slick with sweat and alcohol into that just as damp basement? Because I am. You wouldn't know, but my heartbeat has picked up a little bit, and my eyes are just a little more active than usual. I never have felt totally comfortable at parties- I act like it, sure, but I never really am. I'm not this time either. I mean, I'm surrounded by people who are significantly more attractive than me. Maybe you can't relate to that- or maybe that's my biased opinion. It doesn't help, all the bodies pressing around me, bumping me, not caring when I mumble sorry under my breath, probably not even noticing me in the first place. I highly doubt you noticed, at least at first. But I am positive you notice that smell. It's hard to describe, but it hits the back of your throat when you breathe in. Salty, heavy, with a tang of sharpness? You must have noticed it, because it's coming mostly from the pool of spilled drink, mixed, I'm sure, with sweat, located under the jungle juice cooler, and you're standing right next to it. That same smell, less pungent, is coming

from your cup. It's even on your breath a little, isn't it? Of course, I haven't noticed this yet, seeing as I'm still at the bottom of the stairs, being handed an empty cup by some guy in a basketball jersey that I'm glad I don't know. I really do wonder if you watched my descent down the stairs. Sometimes I wonder if you saw me. Sometimes I decide I don't care.

Time seems to go by a lot faster when a lot is happening, don't you think? I know it's not a profound notion, but I felt it was noteworthy. Sporting events, movies, parties- obviously parties- these are the most obvious culprits, stealing time, a thief without regret (I guess that's ironic, you being who you are- a thief). This party is no exception. After a few drinks on both of our parts and what feels like only fifteen minutes of saying hi to people that are starting to look more out of focus, it's been 2 hours. And at this point, I'm realizing all the friends I came with are wrapped up in their own drama. And now is when I notice you. Because I am standing in a corner of the basement, trying not to touch the walls that are disgustingly wet, and you're standing in an adjacent corner, just behind the table, sipping your drink, completely alone in the sea of people. And that's exactly what I am.

Now? I question it. I ask myself why I went to talk to you. But I know it was because we were both alone. And maybe I thought we could be less alone if I knew your name. You're almost shy at first. Maybe shy isn't the right word, maybe it was something else entirely. I think you're surprised I am talking to you, to be perfectly honest, but the cup in my hand and the non threatening nature of your glasses and the way you stood, like you were making sure no one

noticed you? It convinced me it was a good idea. Maybe also the fact that your glasses are cute, and your dirty blonde curls make you even cuter.

And now we're talking. You are showing me that you are smart, and I am acting more impressed than I actually am. After all, I am pretty sure that my grades are better than yours, and I'm pretty sure that you aren't in the honors societies that I am, but I don't want to bring that up. It's your ego I'm trying to fluff, not mine. We are migrating outside after a little bit. See that brick building over there? Apparently people have been known to forgo the wait for the bathroom inside the house and just use that building as a urine target. You're saying you know, you've seen it, and the look on your face is such an amusing little grimace, I can't help giggling. I don't giggle.

This isn't usually me, by the way. I'm kind of shy, definitely awkward, unsure of what to say or what to do. I read and write in my room alone most nights, perfectly content to be left to my imagination. But tonight I am wearing a crop top that is cut too low, and jeans that make my stomach look flatter than it actually is. Tonight, I have decided- and let my new friends convince me- that I am going to step out of my shell, talk to people, get more involved. I guess that's what I'm doing with you.

My thoughts are becoming less clear the more times my cup gets emptied, but I don't think I'm too far gone. I don't think you think I am, either, but people are beginning to branch

off, and you're offering to walk me home. I think it's sweet. We are walking, then, talking, holding hands- I'm not sure when that happened, but I'm pretty sure I'm okay with it- and we're walking in as straight a line as possible because you see that car? Cops. For sure. And then we walk into a building. I'm a little confused because I'm pretty sure that I don't live here. Then again, I have only been living in this building for a month, I can't pretend I have used every entrance, but I am still pretty sure this isn't mine. I ask and you clarify. I don't live here. You do. I think I remember you mentioning that's where we were going, but to be honest, I'm just glad I can sit down, so I am almost positive that I don't care who lives here.

A few staircases later and we are in your room. How can you stand these lights, they're so bright. I am giggling again, I think it's funny how bright they are. They are actually hurting my eyes, and I mention it to you. You don't hesitate to turn them off. I am sighing, because that definitely is better, but you know that, don't you? After all, you are inches from my face, and within seconds you make sure to close that distance. I don't think I asked you to do that, and I don't think I leaned in, but I kissed you back. That's what you do when someone kisses you, right? I mean, I would be rude not to.

I don't have to tell you what happened next. You know. You asked if something could happen, if that thing could happen, and asked again, and asked again, and asked again. Dylan, you know all that. You also know that I said I didn't think I wanted to. I wasn't comfortable with it. *Was I sure?* Yes, I was sure. *Really?* Really. *Just for a little.* Not... that. *Why was I being a*

tease? I didn't mean to be. Didn't I like it? That's not the point, I don't want to. Why was I here then? I don't know. Maybe it wouldn't be a big deal, right? I don't know. Maybe we can try. I don't think so. I don't know. Just for a little? I don't- Come on, just five minutes, that's all. Um. It's fine, just for a little. I guess... Come on. I don't know. You want to. Um.

Okay.

...

It's seven a.m. See the light through that window? It's because it's morning. Of course you aren't seeing it, you're still asleep. But I want to go, I have to go. Now. My head is reeling, and I don't feel good, so I think- I know- I really have to go. And I have your snap, you gave it to me at the party, you said you wanted to text me, to get lunch sometime. So that's good. Good. I feel gross, though. I feel wrong. I try not to think about what happened, because I shouldn't dwell, right? I took a shower before I left, though, thinking maybe I will stop feeling gross. All that the shower did, though, was hide the tears that I couldn't keep from coming. I was alone, no one could hear me, it was okay that I was crying, but I just didn't know why. I had agreed, I had come back with you, I had walked up to you. I didn't think I was supposed to be crying, but, again, I couldn't force myself to stop.

I wonder when you decided you didn't want to have lunch. I wonder if you knew at the party, Dylan, before we went to your room. I wonder if that even matters. It doesn't. But I wonder. I wonder if you know that I think about it. If you know that I'm ashamed. If you know that I'm embarrassed, mortified, actually, because you told people, and it made it real? If you know that we apparently have mutual friends, Jess, Colin, and they tease me about it, and I have to laugh along and roll my eyes and move on? If you know that even now I find myself defending you to my own mind? I mean, I said okay.

By the way? It wasn't okay.

But who cares, right? Because I'm just one, one of them, not special, not unique. And at this point, this is the third time I have felt this way. What's that saying? Two's a coincidence, three is a pattern? I guess it's my pattern, it has to be my pattern. Mine. Me. Maybe it was me. That's what made it my end. You, without a doubt, convinced me that it was my pattern. And the notion that I had no faith in myself lodged itself deep within my very subconscious. The beginning of the end. My fault. Open your eyes, Dylan.

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ACADEMIC VITA

EDUCATION

The Pennsylvania State University, University Park, PA | Class of 2022

BA English & BA Philosophy

MA English: Creative Writing

Schreyer Scholar, Schreyer Honors College

Dean's List, Fall 2018 — Present

WORK EXPERIENCE

Camp Counselor | Camp B-more, Towson, MD | June, 2015-Present

- Responsible for the safety and well-being of campers ages 3-6
- Assisted director with developing and planning camp activities
- Created and taught basic educational material

Guided Study Group Leader | Pennsylvania State Learning, University Park, PA | January, 2020-Present

- Offer comprehensive Symbolic Logic material and exam reviews
- Provide individual tutoring sessions at request within subject

Note Taker (English Literature) | Pennsylvania State University, University Park, PA | January, 2020 - May, 2020

- Compose extended notes pages for academic use

AWARDS & SPECIAL ACHIEVEMENTS

Department of English Internship Support Award | Spring 2020

- Recognizes student who are participating in an English based internship for their dedication, hard work and commitment to the position and the department