It starts with "F": A collection of short stories

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An Abstract of a Thesis
Submitted
in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

Arielle Irvine
University of Northern Iowa
May 2018
It Starts with “F”: A Collection of Short Fiction consists of five short stories that share a family-centered theme while tackling tough topics such as death, separation, adoption, and personal fulfillment.
IT STARTS WITH “F”: A COLLECTION OF SHORT STORIES

A Thesis
Submitted
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Master of Arts

Arielle Irvine
University of Northern Iowa
May 2018
This Study by: Arielle Irvine

Entitled: It Starts with “F”: A Collection of Short Stories

has been approved as meeting the thesis requirement for the
Degree of Master of Arts

Date _______________  Dr. Jim O’Loughlin, Chair, Thesis Committee

Date _______________  Dr. Grant Tracey, Thesis Committee Member

Date _______________  Dr. Vince Gotera, Thesis Committee Member

Date _______________  Dr. Patrick Pease, Interim Dean, Graduate College
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Leaves of a Tree

With the window cracked open, a gust of fall wind swept through the russet, beat-up Chevy Impala stopped at the single stoplight in town. Juniper “June” Evans sat in the back seat while her mother, in the driver’s seat, applied a thick coat of black mascara using the rearview mirror.

“The light turned green,” June said. She stared ahead as the cars behind them honked an impatient cacophony.

“Shit!” Her mom pressed on the gas and the brush swiped over her eyebrow and up her forehead. “Fuck!”

“We don’t swear in this family, Mama,” she said quietly.

“Yeah, I know, June.” Her mother steered with one hand while licking her thumb and wiping away the black streak on her forehead with the other one. “Thanks.”

“Mmhmm . . .” June muttered. As they drove through what little bit of town there was, her eyes drifted from tree to tree and she got caught up in all the leaves, each seemingly deader than the last. They’d faded from yellow, to orange, to red, and then to the final color, to the one that declared their death once and for all: brown.

“Isn’t Lakeview a beautiful town, honey?”

“Sure.”

June learned early on that every small town looked essentially the same: old crumbling buildings, abandoned storefronts, and worn-down houses with peeling paint and too many lawn ornaments.
“You excited for your first day of school?” her mother asked.

She shrugged, then realized her mother couldn’t see that response from the front of the car. “I guess.”

It was June’s second first day of third grade. It was her sixth first day of any grade overall. Her mom liked moving, seeing new places. The last place had been good. June was happy with her friends, teachers, and house. They’d been there for the longest time, and she’d finally settled in when her mom decided to pick up and go again. This time they were back in her mom’s hometown after her most recent relationship had failed.

“I’m sure you’ll make a ton of friends. It’s a good school, good people.” She parked the car in a handicap spot illegally, then turned around to face June. “Okay, Junie, we’re here, you ready?”

June shrugged and wrapped her fingers around the handle of her pink butterfly-print backpack and squeezed until her knuckles turned white. She opened the car door and stepped out, throwing her heavy bag over her shoulders as she followed her mom towards the school’s entrance.

“I have a lot of really good memories here, Junie.” Her mom opened the door and smiled. “I think you’ll really like it here.”

They proceeded to the main office, which contained four desks and four women working noisily at them. Along the back wall were two private offices. According to the nameplates, the doors belonged to Vice Principal Romans and Principal Edwards.
“Lord in heaven, Calliope Elizabeth Evans, is that you?” the older woman, who smelled terribly of mothballs, exclaimed as she stood up from the desk closest to the door and eyed June’s mother. “Oh, my goodness, you look as young as ever! How have you been? You know, you just missed your ten-year reunion, honey!”

“Oh yeah, I know, I was out in Nebraska and couldn’t get the time off work. And it’s Callie.”

“Well, isn’t that a dang shame,” the lady said while looking down at June. “This can’t be your little baby from way back when, can it?” She bent over and pulled June closer, examining her face between rough, sweaty palms. “She looks exactly like you did at that age!”

“Yeah, she’s my little clone.” Callie put a hand on June’s shoulder and pulled her away from the lady. “And today’s her first day. Her grandmother came by earlier this week to enroll her, June Evans.”

“Okay, give me one second, Calliope.” The lady’s lips stretched to reveal a crooked smile.

“It’s Callie, Deborah, always has been,” June’s mom said.

“Oh, yes, I remember now,” Deborah said. She nodded, then went to a filing cabinet and searched through it for a moment. She returned a few seconds later with a manila folder in hand. “Oh, well, it looks like we have a Juniper Evans, is that right?”

“Yes, but she goes by June.”
“Alrighty, I’ll note that in her file.” Deborah scribbled something on the side of the folder, then flipped it open and scrawled something else on the tops of the papers inside. “Juniper Evans, such a unique name. Just like her mom.”

“June.”

“Right.” Deborah peered over the papers at June’s mom. “Well, let me go grab the principal. She makes a point of walking every new student to class so they can get a chance to talk a little bit first. Give me one minute, you two.” Deborah disappeared into the principal’s office.

“All right, Junie, I’m going to have to take off for work once they get back.” Her mom licked her fingers and ran them over a few wild hairs falling over June’s eyes.

“Your grandma will be here to pick you up after school. You ready?”

“Yeah.” June shrugged. “I guess.”

Her mother bent down in front of her and put her hands on either of her shoulders.

“Baby June, you know I love you, right?”

“Yes, Mama.”

“More than what?” She ran her hands over Jane’s tightly pulled back hair, then down her braids.

“More than all the moons and stars, Mama.”

“That’s right, Junie, more than all the moons and stars.” She leaned forward and laid a soft kiss on June’s head before standing back up. “You’re going to love it here.”

Deborah returned, this time with another woman close behind.
“Calliop . . . Callie, June, this is Principal Edwards. She’ll take June off your hands and escort her to her classroom now.” Deborah turned to June. “I hope you have a wonderful first day of third grade here, June.”

“Thanks.” June tugged on her backpack straps while Principal Edwards shook her mom’s hand. As she looked around the room at the yearbooks, the pictures littering the walls and desks, and the filing cabinets filled with all the details of every student’s existence at this school, June couldn’t help but simply want to get this day over with.

“Come on, little lady, let’s get you to your classroom,” Principal Edwards said. She held out a hand for June.

June took her hand reluctantly and waved goodbye to her mother, whose back was already turned as she was more than halfway out the door.

Principal Edwards led June into the hallway and down a lengthy corridor, passing by many rooms along the way. “This is the elementary wing, the only place I should ever find you wandering around, okay?”

“Okay.”

“The middle school wing and the high school wing are further south and are generally off limits.”

The principal looked at June when she didn’t verbally respond, so June nodded her acknowledgment, then continued taking in all the lockers with names plastered on them in various creative ways. Each was decorated differently with colored pictures of cheerleaders and football players and band players.
After about ten questions and general get-to-know-you chit-chat, they stopped in front of an oak door with blue construction paper covering it and colorful handprints sprinkled that reminded June of what she’d imagine unicorn poop would look like, all rainbows and sparkles.

Principal Edwards opened the door and ushered June in. Everyone in the classroom turned around in unison to watch the tall, redheaded girl enter.

The heavy blonde teacher smiled and clapped a quick, loud clap. “Ooh, you must be our new student!”

The principal nodded.

“Juniper Evans, right?” the teacher asked.

June nodded in a quick motion then looked up at Principal Edwards, whose hand was gently lying her shoulder now.

“She goes by June,” Principal Edwards said before turning to June and confirming. “Is that right?”

“Yeah,” June said.

“Well, I’m Ms. Perry, June, and it’s a pleasure to meet you. Now, Juniper, though, that’s an interesting name, do you know where your parents got it?”

June stared blankly at Ms. Perry for a moment, then looked at the class. The kids stared back at her, their eyes taking her in.

“It’s just my mom and me.” She looked from the class to the teacher. “And I’m pretty sure it’s a plant.”
The teacher nodded. Her lips twitched as she said, “Well, yes, dear, it certainly is.” After a few seconds of awkward silence, the principal nodded at Ms. Evans, who promptly gestured to the only open desk in the room. “Well, we have an open spot right up front. Why don’t you go take a seat?”

June looked out at the sea of children and only moved forward a step.

The principal moved her hand to the middle of June’s back and gave her a light push. “Go on now. Take a seat and class will start soon.”

After taking in a deep breath, June took another step forward, and then another, exhaling slowly until she got to her seat.

Class went by slowly. Half an hour in, the teacher put them in small groups and instructed them to work on a science experiment June had done in other classes before where they had to make a lightbulb light up using a potato, a penny, a nail, and a copper wire. After everyone got their potato-light working, they moved on to English, then math, then reading. After lunch, they were let out into the playground for recess.

June wandered around the edges of the playground while tugging at the bands around the ends of her braids. Slowly, she removed them, then worked her fingers through her tight braids. It hurt to loosen them but as soon as her hair was free she rubbed her fingers against her scalp, over and over. It felt like heaven. Like freedom.

“Whatcha doin?” a boy’s voice asked from behind her. She faced the boy with short brown hair and pudgy cheeks who stood half a foot shorter than her. She recognized him from her classroom.

“My braids were too tight,” she said. “So, I took them out.”
“You have a lot of hair.” He teetered from one foot to the other while eyeing her hair. “You look like that one Disney princess.”

“Yeah, I get that a lot.”

“She’s ugly.” He scrunched his face.

“You’re not too cute yourself, Toad.” June turned back around to continue her walk.

“Say that to my face!” the kid shouted at her.

“I would, but then I’d have to bend down to your eye level, and that’s too much work,” June said over her shoulder as she continued walking away.

“Yeah . . . well . . . well, at least I have BOTH parents,” the kid yelled after her.

June stopped and thought about it for a quick second. She could keep walking and ignore the kid and his wrongful assumption. Or . . .

She turned on her heel and stomped over to him, smiling. “Is that so?” she asked.

“Yeah.” He swallowed what little machismo remained. “It is.”

Without halting, she balled up her fist, lifted her hand, and punched the kid in his nose. Just like Ken had taught her. Red liquid spewed from his nose, covering his mouth and dripping down his shirt. He cried out as he reached for his nose and cupped it with both hands.

“You punched me. You’re crazy!” he said, though it came out muffled from between his hands. “You’re gonna pay for that.”
He turned and ran back towards the teacher on duty. Within seconds, June’s name was called and the three of them went to the Principal’s office. The teacher took the boy off to the nurse’s station, leaving June alone with Principal Edwards.

“Take a seat, June,” Principal Edwards said. She gestured to a chair sitting in front of her desk. June sat, looking around the room at the picture frames filled with kids and happy families. “Can you tell me what happened out there on the playground?”

June shrugged. What was there to say?

“We don’t tolerate bullying at this school,” Principal Edwards said.

“Then maybe you should talk to the kid I punched.”

“I will, once he’s back from the nurse’s station and I’ve heard your side of the story. So please, can you tell me what happened on the playground?”

“That kid made fun of my hair, and then he said something about my family.”

Principal Edwards nodded, writing down something on a piece of paper. “Okay, I know it might hurt to tell me, but can you tell me exactly what he said?” She looked up at June over the paper and waited.

June looked at the picture on the desk of Principal Edwards with two kids and a woman. “Is that your family?”

“Yes, June, it is,” Principal Edwards said. “And I wouldn’t like it very much if someone said something mean about them, either, so can you please tell me what Todd said?”

“That’s his name?” No wonder she’d thought of a toad when she thought of him.

“Yes.”
“‘At least I have both parents,’ that’s what Todd said to me.”

Principal Edwards nodded, writing some more on the piece of paper.

“Thank you, June.”

June leaned her head back and stared at the ceiling. “Am I going to get in trouble?”

“A little bit, yes. We don’t stand for violence, but June?” June turned her attention back to the woman. “We also don’t stand for bullying. And it sounds like the both of you were bullying a little bit.”

June rolled her eyes and crossed her arms. “What would you have done?”

“Told a grown-up.”

“Yeah, I’m sure.” June forced a smile. “So, do I get to go now?”

“We’re going to have to send you home for the day. You’ll be able to come back to school tomorrow.”

June’s cheeks flushed. “No one can pick me up. My mom and grandma are both working.”

“Then I guess one of them will have to leave work, I’m sorry.” Principal Edwards sighed. “That’s why you need to think about others before you do something rash, June.”

The principal found June’s file and called her mother first, who couldn’t answer. Then her grandmother, who couldn’t leave work.

“There’s a third contact, June. Your father?” the Principal asked, the phone in one hand while she held down the switch hook. “I thought you said it was only you and your mother?”
“It is, mostly. I don’t see Ken often.”

“Ken,” the principal repeated. “Hmm. Okay. Well, I’m going to try call—”

“No, my mom won’t like that.” June leaned forward and said in a quiet voice,

“She doesn’t like him.”

“Well, someone needs to come get you, June, and he’s listed as your third
emergency contact.”

“Is this an emergency? Can’t I wait in the office until my mom can come get me?”

The principal shifted in her seat and set the phone back on the receiver. “Is there a
reason you don’t want to see your father?”

“It’s not that!” June sighed, then sat back in the chair and crossed her arms. “Just
call him.”

“Okay.” She picked up the phone and dialed a number. “I’m sure everything will
be fine.”

June’s mom was a good mom just as much as her dad was a good dad. But her
mom liked to be the only one that took care of June. Even her grandma had limited time
with her. It had always been that way: just June and her mom. And for a long time, that
had been nice. They’d paint their toenails blue, her mom’s favorite color, so they’d be
matching, and they’d go shopping and her mom bought June the best clothes, the ones
that made June look like a younger version of her mother. Her mother was her best
friend. These days, she was pretty much her only friend.
“Ken Slater?” the principal said into the phone. “Hi, this is Principal Edwards. I’m calling about your daughter, June Evans.”

June listened as the principal rehashed the fight with the kid to her father. She stared at the ceiling. The ceiling tiles were old and brown, and she kept counting them as they spoke on the phone about her.

“Okay, thank you, we’ll see you soon.” Principal Edwards hung up the phone and smiled. “Looks like your father will be here shortly. I’m going to go grab your things from the classroom and I’ll be right back. Sit tight.”

A short while later she returned with June’s bag in tow, and they waited together on the bench in front of the school for June’s father.

Ken pulled up to the fifteen-minute parking spot in front of them and beamed as he got out. It had been a while since June had seen him last, at least six months. It was the last time he’d been able to come out and that time he’d visited them in Nebraska. His blondish-red hair was longer than it had been and he’d grown a beard that was as dark red and thick as the hair atop June’s head.

“Well, hey there, baby girl, you’re so tall!” He bent over and opened his arms to her. She wrapped her arms around his neck and squeezed him tight. “How are you?”

“It’s been a long day,” she said.

“You were only there for half of it before causing trouble.” He ran his hand over her frizzy hair. “Sorry about that,” he said to the principal.

“I think it’ll be okay. June seems like a smart kid. I’m pretty sure this won’t be happening again.”
“It won’t, right, June?”

“Right.” June backed up towards Ken’s blue hatchback. “Can we go now?”

Principal Edwards shared a few quick words with Ken, then he took June’s hand and led her to his car. She jumped in the backseat and buckled up while he got in the front seat.

“First things first, I should go talk to your mom so she knows exactly what’s going on.”

They drove over to the gas station that her mom worked at and he parked the car right in front of the open-windowed storefront.

“Stay in the car. I’m going to go talk to your mother. I’ll be right back,” Ken said, stepping outside. He left the car on with the cold air blasting into the backseat, cooling June’s cheeks.

June watched as he entered the empty gas station. Through the windows, she saw him go to the register. Her mom looked outside at June, and June smiled wanly at her mother while giving her a small wave. Her mother’s face grew red as she walked around the counter to Ken. Her hands flew in the air, and June couldn’t help it, without thinking about it, her hand tugged on the car door handle and before she knew what she was going to say, she was inside the building with the both of her parents screaming at each other.

“You left me, remember?”

“For work! And when I got back you were gone! And now I have to fight to be a part of my daughter’s goddamn life.”

She ran to her mother and pulled on the hem of her shirt as hard as she could.
“Because I can rely on myself better than I can rely on you!”

“You sure know how to rely on my money.”

“Mom,” she yelled over her mother’s much louder voice. She was screaming words at Ken that June had too often heard. Especially in conversations with Ken.

“Do you know what it’s like to go months on end without seeing her?”

“No! Because I’ve never even thought about leaving her side!”

“Mom!” June yelled louder, as loud as her lungs would allow. Her mother barely glanced at her before grabbing June’s shoulders and pulling her close. She continued to tear into Ken like June had never heard before. June pushed back against her mother, trying to get away, but her grasp was too tight. Finally, not knowing what else to do, she slammed her fist into her mother’s stomach and yelled, “CALLIOPE!”

Instantly, her mother let go and stared down at June while holding onto her abdomen. “Juniper Elizabeth Evans!” her mother shouted. “You don’t ever hit people. You already got in trouble once for that today!”

Both her parents were staring at her. “We were talking, Junie,” Ken said. “Please go wait in the car.”

“No, go to the storeroom and wait in there, June.” Her mother glared at Ken.

“Don’t tell my daughter what to do.”

“I am her father!” Ken yelled, his arms calmly at his sides as he stepped forward.

“She’s my daughter, too.”

“Get out of here.” Calliope raised her hands as she stepped towards him. “She doesn’t even want to see you.”
“MOM!” June pulled on her arm.

“What?” her mother turned her fury back to June.

“I want to go to the park,” she spit out as quickly as she could, then added, “With da—with Ken.”

“With Ken?” Calliope’s gaze shifted from June to Ken, then back. “You think you deserve to go to the park at all, young lady? You’ll be lucky if—”

“Callie, it’s just the park. I’ll take her, she’ll get some energy out of her system, and then we’ll eat dinner and I’ll return her to you, good as new.” He put a hand on June’s shoulder, who backed up to be closer to him. “Give me a couple of damn hours with my daughter. Please.”

“She doesn’t deserve to have fun after she just got into a fight, Ken.”

“She’s a kid. She made a mistake. And he was being an asshole anyway.”

Callie rolled her eyes. “You know what? Fine,” her mother said through tight lips. Turning to Ken, she continued, “Bring her home by seven. A minute later and I’ll call the cops on you.”

“You don’t get off work until seven,” June said, grabbing onto Ken’s hand. Her mother’s eye twitched visibly. “Seven-fifteen. No later.”

“Of course,” June’s father said, nodding, while opening the door for June.

“Whatever you say.”

Without looking back, they exited the gas station and hopped into the car.

Once on the road, and at the single stoplight, June’s father turned to look at her and asked, “How about some ice cream?”
“Strawberry?” June asked.

“That sounds perfect to me.” He smiled and turned back a few seconds before the light turned green.

They drove to the ice cream parlor in Lakeview and got two strawberry cones. After, they drove to the park and sat on the bench in front of the playground to eat their cold, sweet treats.

The sun was out, the sky was light blue and clear, the grass was green, and the trees here were alive and rich with life. It was perfect. Not too hot and not too cold. June’s skin was warm, and for the first time in a while, she felt truly happy as she closed her eyes and leaned back, the cold ice cream melting in her mouth, down the cone, and onto her hand.

“So how was your first day of school?” her dad asked.

She opened her eyes and looked at him, not sure if he was being serious. “Nothing special.”

“That bad, huh?” He failed at holding back a small laugh.

“I punched a kid.”

“You really shouldn’t have done that, honey. In all seriousness, I hope you know that.”

“I know, but he was being an asshole,” she said. She took a bite out of the strawberry ice cream. “He deserved it.

“Don’t say asshole,” her father said, sighing. He took a bite of his ice cream.

“Fine, ass.”
“Don’t say ass either.”

“They’re just words, Dad, and you just used them talking to Mom.”

Her father looked at her and smiled the widest she’d seen in a long time. She nudged her arm into his and smiled back.

“You can use them when you’re older then, June.”

She gazed at the playground and thought about running around and playing. But instead she leaned her head against her dad and looked up to the sky.

“Hey, Dad?”

“Yes?” her father said, still smiling.

“Can you call me Juniper?”

June smiled back at her dad as he laid his hand over hers and squeezed.

“Of course, sweetie.” He paused for a moment and then asked, “Hey, Juniper?”

“Yeah?”

“You know, that was my mother’s name.”
The Story of Us

May 2010

Shallow, quick breaths escape from my lips. Sweat trickles down my forehead. Fingers twitch nervously. Looking over the steep descent, I retreat backwards.

“We should rethink this.”

“What’s there to rethink? We agreed.” Halle smiles and my world shifts on its axis. She continues speaking as she steps towards me, “It’s good for us to take risks once in a while.”

Her hands reach out for mine and pull me closer, steadying the wave of anxiety coursing through me.

“We didn’t think it through enough. What if we get hurt? Or worse?” I ask. My fingers trace her smooth, coconut-scented arms up to her face, where they rest on her rose-colored cheek softly. “I can’t lose you.”

She puts a finger to my lips and shushes me. “Stop worrying so much, Tasha. Everything is going to be fine.” She grabs my hand and squeezes it. “Better than fine—great! People do this all the time!”

“Yeah.” I face the endless pine trees that surround us on the opposite side of the Pacific Ocean. I could run away if I wanted. To safety. To stable ground. To a marked path. The option is literally sitting five feet away and surrounding me. But I turn back to her. “I know.”
She lets go of my hand and dances away towards the edge. Her bare feet kick up small clouds of dirt around her legs. Her short rainbow hair sparkles in the sunlight. She moves before me like some mythical, magical being. I could never run.

“Nearly a year together and I still forgot how much you worry,” she says. She twirls back and forth, dancing to the beat in her mind. Nearly a year together and I still always forget how fearless, headstrong, and adventurous she is.

“I worry for good reason. Bad things happen all the time. Why increase those chances?”

“Tasha! Baby, listen, what is the point of being alive if you don’t at least try to do something remarkable?” She stops dancing and smirks at me.

“First, don’t quote John Green to me. Second, don’t be cute right now. Third, there is nothing remarkable about this. In fact, it’s a very ordinary thing to do.”

“Exactly!” she runs to me, grabs my hands, and pulls me closer to the edge. She’s still closer with her back to the waves crashing below. She runs her hands up my arms and through my long blonde hair. When she pulls back, she says, “So ordinary that we might as well do it.”

I sigh, and nod. I could never resist her.

“Might as well,” I repeat.

She squeezes my hands tightly before letting go again. She strips down to her skivvies, then helps me with mine, too. After, she grabs my face and pulls it close.

“Thank you for doing this for me.” She lays a soft kiss on my forehead, then my lips. “I know how much you hate this stuff, but it’s the perfect anniversary gift.”
I nod and wrap my arms around her waist. I squeeze so hard I’m afraid she might break, but she never winces. Instead, she places her lips against my ear and says, “You can do this.”

I take a few steps forward and stand on the edge beside her.

“I love you,” I say, forcing myself to breathe slowly.

“I love you, too,” she says, and I don’t have to look to know she’s beaming.

The deep ocean blue is moving with life fifty feet below us. Our fingers weave tightly together as we prepare ourselves for what’s to come. Nodding in sync, we take a step back, then jump. Towards our fate. Whatever it may be, I’m with her and that’s all that matters.

We land in the water, far below the surface, our bodies still sinking when our hands reach out and find each other in the dark. I hold on to her tightly as we kick our way to air. Gasping as I breach, laughing and coughing up water. My heartbeat thumps loudly in my ears as she pulls me into her embrace.

“How was it?” Her eyes are expectantly waiting as I laugh. I can’t stop. “That good?”

“It was incredible!” I shout when I’m able to take control of my hysterics again. Looking out at the miles upon miles of open water beyond us, it’s unlike anything I could have ever imagined. Every color in the world is brighter, the sun is hotter, the air is purer; it’s all so beautiful. So perfect. I look back at the woman beside me. “You’re incredible.”

She grins before diving under the water, tickling my feet as she passes by.
I follow as she swims towards the beach. We collapse onto the dry sand breathing heavy, side by side, hand in hand.

“Let’s do it again,” I say.

_August 2011_

We walk, Halle’s arm wrapped around my waist, and mine around hers, along the boardwalk admiring the variety of booths and food trucks.

As we pass by a ball-pitching booth, a man eggs her on, “Win your fine lady a prize?” He flashes us a crooked smile and raises an eyebrow, then continues, “If you knock over the top bottle you win a small stuffed animal, take down three and you get a medium-sized one. Get all six and win the big stuffed animal: bear, tiger, cheetah, whatever she wants!”

Halle reaches into her pocket.

“Don’t, Halle.” I hold on tight to her arm and shake my head.

“Baby, it’s just for fun.”

She laughs, kisses my cheek, pulls her arm free of me, and pays the man ten dollars for five balls. She prepares her arm by swinging it around very dramatically a few times, then throws. The ball hits above the top metal bottle, then smacks into the fabric backdrop before thumping to the floor. The man laughs at her misfire, and she turns to me and grins.

_I got this_, she mouths.
On her next pitch, she takes a few seconds then chucks the ball as hard as she can, hitting just below the second row of the pyramid of bottles. The bottles loudly tumble from the stand, the pyramid now in ruin on the floor.

The man scoffs and challenges her further. “Lucky shot. Let’s see you do it again.” Halle raises her eyebrows at the man. “Take down this set over here with your remaining balls and I’ll let you take away three of the big stuffed animals. Your old lady will walk away a real lucky woman.”

“And if I fail?”

He digs his thumbs into his chest and says, “I win.”

“And winner takes all,” Halle says. She looks over at me and I shake my head. For a moment she hesitates, but then she sets the remaining balls down. “I’m done. My young lady will take the big ass elephant up there.”

The guy sighs, looks up and grabs a rod from the wall and hits the elephant lightly until it topples down into his arms. He hands it to Halle over the counter, who she smiles wildly as she hands it to me.

As we walk away, the elephant head-locked under my right arm with my left arm around her, I whisper, “Do you really think that was fair?”

“It’s a game, Tasha, it’s fair. Some people are good, some aren’t.” She wraps an arm around my shoulders, and I wrap my free one around her waist.

“You played softball all four years of high school and all through college.”

She laughs, then swiftly changes the subject, “So now, the Ferris Wheel?”

“Can we?” I ask, facing her.
“God, I hate these things,” she says as we approach the line. “But for you . . .”

“We don’t have to—”

“No, you want to go, so we’re going.”

We join the line of people waiting and I rest my head on her shoulder.

“Hey, dykes, how about some tongue-action?” Some guy’s voice yells from behind us. Halle looks around before landing on a group of douches laughing off to the side. She flips them the bird.

“Up yours, assholes.”

“Come on, line’s moving,” I say, dragging her forward.

“Someone needs to shove a d—” she begins to yell at them until she sees the mother and young daughter standing in line ahead of us staring back at us, “a rainbow . . . in your f’n mouth.”

I laugh. “That’s what you came up with?”

She shrugs as we move up the stairs to the entrance. “Better than what I could’ve said.”

I nuzzle my nose into her neck and whisper, “You’re sweet.”

She brings her lips to mine and whispers back, “No, you’re sweet. I’m spicy.”

“Or cheesy,” I say, kissing her nose.

We reach the front of the line and the operator asks for our tickets. Once Halle hands them over, he ushers us to the enclosed seats. I scoot in and set the elephant on the floor as Halle gets in and sits beside me. He closes the door to our bucket, then gives us a thumbs up before hitting a button that raises us.
The ride moves up and forward slowly as the operator lets more people on, one bucket at a time. Halle has her hand tightly clasped over mine.

“We really didn’t have to do this,” I say.

“Yes, we did,” she says, looking over at me.

“Why?”

“Because you need to know how much you mean to me.”

“Hal, I already know.”

We move to the top of the wheel, now overlooking the fair and the city beyond it. Halle shifts in her seat so she’s fully facing me.

I smile at her and say, “Are you trying to get fresh with me right now? Because I don’t think we’re supposed to be moving around so much in these things.”

“Natasha, just shut up for a minute.”

“Halle!”

She gives me a look. The look. The raised eyebrows, the puckered lips, the cheeks flushed. She is serious. So, I shut up and listen to her.

“I love you more than anything in this world. You know that.” She reaches into her pocket. “I would go to the ends of every world for you. I would name every star after you.” She smiles and takes a deep breath, then continues, “I would do anything for you. Even go on a stupid kid’s ride that scares the living daylight out of me. I love you. I have since the moment I met you on that bus to Minneapolis three years ago, and I’ve only fallen more in love with you every adventure since. And I would love to love you forever if you let me.”
She reaches into her coat pocket and pulls out a small robin’s egg blue box. “And since we will, hopefully, soon be able to get married in this country, I would be the most ecstatic person in the world if you would do me the honor of being my wife the second it becomes legal.”

She opens the box and resting inside is a silver ring with a blue jewel setting.

My cheeks flush, pulse races, world stops. My lungs are empty as I stare at her, mouth agape. The only thing left is her, sitting beside me with my future in her hands. Our future. Together.

“Of course!” I wrap my arms around her neck and kiss her. “Of course, I’ll marry you!”

We fall back against the seat and wait for the wheel to start spinning again. She pulls me against her tighter and I hold her equally as close.

“You are super cheesy, though.” I say, shaking my head and smiling back at her.

“Maybe, but I knew you’d love it.”

“And I do. It’s the perfect start to forever.”

She kisses my head, then says, “I thought so.”

October 2012

I’m sorting through boxes in the bedroom when Halle enters and leans against the wall, watching me.

“Have you found the box with your hair thingy in it yet?” Halle asks while chewed-up chip bits threaten to escape from her lips.
“The diamond-encrusted hair ornament that my mother gave me as ‘something old and something blue’ that I am supposed to wear to our wedding, which is less than three days away? No, I have not found it yet.”

“I’ve said I’m sorry a hundred times, Tash. I didn’t mean to pack it with the rest of your bathroom stuff. I didn’t know what was in the white box on the counter. I just assumed it was more makeup or something.”

I shake my head. It’s not worth the fight. Not now. It’ll turn up eventually.

“We should have waited to move,” is all I say. “Until after the wedding.”

“Baby,” Halle says. She rubs my inner thigh with one hand, tossing her empty chip bag in the trashcan near our nightstand with the other. “You know this place was too good to miss out on.”

I stare at her, eyes wide. “A month before our wedding, Halle. A month. Before our wedding. We moved. Who does that?”

“Free spirits. The daring types.” She leans in and nuzzles into my neck. “It’s fun. We have all these new things to explore in our new home with our new rings and new titles.” She kisses behind my ear. “I’d like to introduce my wife, Mrs. Flynn . . .”

“Halle . . .”

“I promise I’ll make it up to you on our next adventure.”

“How about for now we cut back on the adventures?” I ask as I pull away from her embrace. I take a box off the bed and bring it into the bathroom. She follows.

“You mean until the honeymoon, right?” she asks from the bedroom.
“I mean, how about for a little while at least, we stop calling careless mistakes adventures and stick to being—oh I don’t know—a little more careful instead.”

“Ouch,” Halle says. She’s leaning in the doorway, arms across her chest. “Yes, ma’am.”

“Don’t patronize me, Hal. If I can’t find that stupid thing before the wedding, we’re both dead.”

“We will find it, baby.” She gestures to the boxes in the bathroom. “How hard could it be?”

*June 2013*

The hot water steams up the bathroom quickly and I get out just in time for my body to be completely obscured in the fogged-up mirror. Grabbing a towel from the rack, I wrap myself in it like a burrito while dancing across the floor to the sink, singing along to the music booming from my Bluetooth speaker. I pick up my wedding ring off the counter, slip it on and wipe off the mirror with a hand towel, then use another towel to wrap up my hair.

The front door slams shut, breaking my nighttime grooming routine. I rush to the bedroom door and listen closely. Halle’s yelling.

“Halle?” I call into the hallway towards the foyer. No response. I move silently on the plush carpet, towards the living room.

“Barb, no, it won’t work. I told you that already. I can’t do this right now,” I hear her say in a hushed voice as I turn around the corner and enter her line of sight.
I turn my head sideways and mouth, *Who is it?*

She shakes her head, fed up, and mouths back, *Work.*

I tap on my wrist where a watch would normally be, and mouth, *You’re late.*

*I know,* she mouths, then shrugs and turns away from me. She says into the phone, irritated, “I have to go.” After a few seconds, she says, “Fine, bye.”

She throws the phone onto the couch and crosses the room hurriedly, pushing me up against the living room wall, kissing me eagerly. A picture frame jabs into my shoulder blade as her hands maneuver around the towel, loosening it so it falls.

“Whoa, Hal, what was that about?” I pull my lips away as she moves on to my neck.

“I don’t want to talk about work,” she mumbles, her mouth against my flesh, her hands groping me.

“Hal, stop. I don’t want to do this. What is going on? Why are you—”

“I said I don’t want to talk about it.” She lets out a loud breath and pulls her head back. “So, let it go.”

“No,” I say. I stare into her eyes. I’ve rarely seen her this irritated. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fucking fine.” She pulls her hands away from me and puts them up in mock surrender. “Can’t I just want to have sex with my wife?”

“Not like this.” I pick up the towel, shaking my head. “Definitely not like this,” I repeat while turning around and heading to our bedroom.

She follows and grabs my arm from behind. “I’m sorry.”
“Stop it, then.” I pull back and walk with her right behind me.

“Natasha, please, I’m sorry.”

“Fine,” I say as I reach my dresser.

“You don’t seem fine,” she follows and stands beside me while I pick through the top drawer searching for underwear. She reaches for my hand but pauses before she touches me. “Honey, please, stop.”

I do. I completely stop. I don’t move. Not an inch.

“Work was long and there are a bunch of new people in the office, and they don’t know what they’re doing, so all day I had to help them. I just wanted to come home and let loose for a minute.”

I stay still.

“Sweetie, I just went about it all wrong.” She touches my chin and turns my face towards her. “I’m sorry.”

“What was the phone call about?” She lets go of my chin.

“I told you it was work. They just wanted to know where I put some papers or something.”

I turn away from her gaze as I remove the towel and slide into a pair of underwear and strap on a bra. I grab a large plain blue T-shirt from a drawer and slip it on. Halle grabs the shirt and pulls me in closer to her.

“Do you forgive me?”

“I don’t know.”

She frowns and kisses my cheek. “But I love you.”
“I know.” I look into her eyes. “But I didn’t like that.”

“I know.” She kisses my lips. “I’m sorry.”

I sigh. “You better be.”

She takes my hands and slides onto the bed, patting the spot next to her. “Join me, please?”

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February 2016

I roll over in bed and reach out to Halle, who’s sitting up. She pulls away from my touch and I lift my head. The alarm clock shows it’s a quarter past three in the morning.

“Halle?” I sit up and turn on the lamp on my nightstand. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing, just go back to bed.” She turns her head to me just enough so that I can see smeared lipstick around her mouth. She’s looking out the window, dressed in jeans and a low-cut black tank top.

“Did you go out?”

“Tash, just go back to sleep!” she snaps as she stands and leaves the bedroom.

My heart drops as I stand and wrap a robe around myself. I follow her out into the kitchen. “Where did you go?”

“God dammit. Leave it alone.”

“Stop it.” She looks away as the waterworks begin. “Don’t you dare look at me that way!” She turns back and points a finger in my face. “You have no idea what I’ve been going through.”
Dumbfounded, I stumble back against the wall and look away.

“This was never supposed to happen. I didn’t mean for it to.” She paces around the kitchen hurriedly, her arms flailing around. “It just did.” She turns to face me. “And I’m so sorry.”

“Are you drunk?” I ask quietly.

“That’s not the point. Tash, I—”

“Don’t. I don’t want to know.” I shake my head. When she reaches out for me, my hands shoot up to push her away. “Whatever you did, I can’t know.”

“Tash, I didn’t mean for this to happen.”

She heads towards me like she’s going to kiss me, and I can’t, so I throw her arms back and step further away.

“Are you going to leave me?” she asks.

“I love you, Hal. Regardless of your selfish, stupid mistakes. When I said those vows, I meant them.”

“I know . . .” She crumbles to her knees in front of me and reaches out her arms for my legs. “And I love you so much.”

“Don’t touch me.” I step back. “I can’t—”

“Baby, I’m so sorry.” She holds her head in her hands and sobs into them. “So sorry.”

“Why are you crying?” I ask. She looks up at me, mascara running down her face. I push the tears back down. “How could you do this to us?”
Her eyes are different than usual. I search them for a place that I can still call home. I look for the woman that I love. Not this replacement in my lover’s body. But not just my lover: my confidante, my wife, my everything.

She shakes her head, crawls across the floor and grabs my legs, wrapping herself around them, sobbing into my robe and stopping me from moving. “Because I’m stupid. I’m so, so stupid.”

“Yes, you—”

“Mama? Mommy?” Our three-year-old boy sleepily stumbles into the kitchen, a thumb in his mouth and his favorite blue blanket in his arms, trailing on the floor behind him.

“Oh, honey,” I say while shaking Halle’s arms off me. “Come here, baby. Did your sister wake up?”

Brice walks into my arms, shaking his head. I lift the nearly thirty-pound boy and rest him on my hip. “Okay, we’re okay, sweetie.” I wipe away unwanted tears on one side of my face with my free hand and he touches the other side and wipes them away with his pajama sleeve.

“You’re crying, Mommy.”

“I know, baby, but I’m okay.”

With sad brown eyes, Brice looks down at Halle on the floor and asks softly in my ear, “Did Mama make you cry again?”
April 2017

“Tash,” Halle begs, “Please, just let me try again. Can’t you see how much this is hurting me?”

“You?” I snap while packing a suitcase full of clothes that aren’t mine. “How much it’s hurting you?” I’m too mad to cry. I’m too pissed off to shed a goddamn tear for her. For everything. Our marriage, our lives, our children. “I gave you every chance!”

“I know and I’m so sorry. I can’t go, I won’t. This is my home, too.” She cries on the floor, drunk again. It’s four o’clock in the morning, and she stayed out late after work again. For the second night in a row.

“I can’t do this anymore, Halle.” I zip up the suitcase and pull out the handle, then push it in front of her. “Now go. Get out.”

“No! I can’t go. Where will I go? I love you. You’re my everything.”

“If that were true, you wouldn’t have slept with half of the female population!” I shout, shaking my head. “I won’t put our children through this and I will not go through this anymore. We tried breaks and I tried sticking it out and living with the fact that I wasn’t your ‘only one,’ but I can’t do it, Halle. Because it is killing me. You are killing me.”

“But you love me. How are you going to survive without me?”

“Do I?” I ask, not intending to hurt her, but to genuinely question it. I didn’t even know if I loved her at this point. Not in the way I once did. Every time I looked at her in the beginning, I felt that fire in my chest, that warming of my soul, but now? I didn’t know what to call the feeling inside. Dark? Cold? Empty. I square my shoulders and
shove the suitcase at her further. “I have a steady job and our two children. I’ll be just fine.”

She uses the suitcase to stand up. “You can’t take them away from me, too. I won’t let that happen. I won’t let you do that to me.”

“Do that to you? You did this to yourself, Halle. Now, you can sleep around all you want and do whatever you want all the goddamn time. As long as it never affects our kids, I will not ‘take’ them away from you. However, the very first time,” I say, pointing a finger in her face, “You ever bring them back to me late, or you miss another one of their events, or you handle them while you’re drunk, I will make sure that you never get to see them again. You understand? Those kids are my world.”

“You’re my world.” She nearly falls over when she attempts to reach for me. I pull back and she screams, “I can’t do this without you!”

“Shut up and get the hell out of here before you wake them up again.”

“I . . . I . . . don’t know where to go.”

“Get a hotel room or something, just get out. Now.”

“Natasha, please, just give me one more chance. I love you. Please.”

“Halle, listen to me carefully, and I know that might be hard considering your condition, but I don’t love you. Not anymore. Not for a while. So, you need to go. Because you are only embarrassing yourself.”
May 2018

Brice and Faith run around the playground. He’s teasing her, but even still, he never takes his eyes off her. He always knows where she is.

I’m sitting on a park bench, watching them play around the jungle gym, a book in my left hand barely being read. My eyes are glued to the most beautiful people I have ever seen. They’re so happy, so free, and full of life and with everything else that a child should have.

Brice is running around, tapping her on the back, then running away and returning. I smile but decide that Faith has had enough now that she’s sitting on the wood chips cross-legged with a pouty look on her face.

“Brice, Faith, come here,” I say just loud enough for them to hear. They look up and Brice’s head falls, knowing he’s done something wrong. “Sweetie, you’re not in trouble.”

He smiles and helps Faith up and together they walk to me holding hands. “Yes, Mommy?”

“Were you teasing your sister?” He looks down at the ground.

“No, Mommy, I was just playing with her. She was laughing.”

“Not when I looked up.” I say, pulling three-year old Faith onto one leg and my big five-year old onto the other leg. “You have to be nice to your sister.”

She looks up at me grumpily, her arms across her chest. “He was mean.”

“No, I wasn’t,” Brice says, looking directly at her and reaching for her hand. “I’m sorry, Faith.”
She looks up at him, tears dried on her cheeks. She doesn’t say anything, but her slow-revealing smile indicates that she’s forgiven him. I give them both a quick kiss on the forehead.

“Mama is going to be here to pick you up soon and you both need to behave for her.”

“We will,” Brice says, sliding off my leg onto the ground. “Can we play some more?”

“Yes, go ahead, but be nice.” I smile as he helps his sister down and holds her hand as they walk away together. “I love you,” I call after them.

Brice and Faith yell over their shoulders in unison, “Love you, too, Mommy.”

I glance at the parking lot and see Halle get out of her car about ten yards away. She walks across the park to join me on the bench. Without a word, she sits beside me.

For a long while, we sit there, watching our children play before us. Years ago, I might’ve reached out a hand to cover hers, or buried myself in her arms, all while she whispered sweet nothings in my ear. Just a few months back and I’d have been digging my nails into my palms sitting this close to her. But now as we sit beside each other, two very separate, but thriving entities, we simply bear witness to the most beautiful, intelligent, and kind young children that this world could be blessed with and all I feel is joy.
My Turn to Be Me

The doors of the Chicago Contemporary Art Gallery were shut, with a *Sorry, We’re Closed* sign hanging from the door. I rapped on the glass, then waited, shivering in my old coat as the January winds whipped at my face. Reflected in the glass, I appeared as a seemingly healthy, young woman with red cheeks, hazel eyes, and short brown hair, mostly concealed under a black winter hat. I danced in my worn-out boots, begging to remember what warmth felt like as my pleather-gloved hands rubbed up and down my arms.

My professor arranged for me to interview a university alumnus for an extra credit project to make up for a couple of missed classes. I’d only been given the location of the interview, a first name, Marco, and a time—3:30 on Tuesday afternoon. I looked at my watch. Where was this guy? I didn’t have time to waste on someone else’s punctuality. There were things I’d rather be doing, too. Like polishing my article for the school paper due Wednesday. Or watching Netflix.

While staring through the glass, lost in thought, someone walked into my line of sight, quickly approaching the door. As he unlocked and opened it, I stumbled into the gallery past him hurriedly, my body pleading for the heat the indoors promised.

“I take it you’re Lexa?” he asked. He chuckled as he locked the door behind me.

“Yes,” I said, glancing around the wide, open room. Along each wall hung massive art pieces, ranging from dark bones buried in black to bright blues and pinks depicting a sunset. Throughout the middle were other creations composed of what the everyday person would consider trash, but in this world, they were clearly treasures.
“I’m Marco. It’s lovely to meet you,” the man said. He reached out his hand and I finally faced him. He was young, tall, and muscular, familiar looking. But I couldn’t place where I’d seen him before. His dark tan skin, messy black hair, and light green eyes would be hard to forget.

“Yeah, you too,” I said, my teeth chattering. Looking around the room, I gestured and asked, “Which one’s yours?”

“Take a guess,” he said.

My body thawed the further I made it into the building. As I reached the first painting, the shivering had stopped entirely. I stepped towards an abstract painting of what looked like birds soaring through a purple lit sky. It was trippy, but in some way it reminded me of the birds who flew south for the winter. I envied the warmth they’d get at the end of their journey.

“I’m not so much the guessing type,” I said.

“Hmm . . .” He followed alongside me. “Is there a reason you’re in an art class then? Isn’t analyzing the work of an artist a bit of a guessing game?”

“I’m in art history. It’s an elective.”

“And you’re a senior?” he asked, confirming what my professor had probably already told him. I nodded, moving on to another painting. “Then did you not choose this elective of your own volition?”

I ignored his question, distracted by the piece before me. It started at the floor, spanned up to the ceiling, and was over ten feet wide. On the canvas was a pair of feminine white hands holding onto a piece of what looked like coal. Everything around
the hands was dark, choppy, background noise. The hands were the focus: large, centered, and gripping the black hole in the middle of the drawing.

“Charcoal?” I asked, leaning forward to get a closer view. My hand reached out about to trace the lines of the fingers in the air.

His hand reached out and stopped in front of my hands, gently pulling them back. I recoiled from his soft touch.

“You know, I think they could cut your hand off in some countries for what you were about to do,” he said.

“I wasn’t going to touch it.” I turned away from his stare. “And in case you hadn’t noticed, this isn’t the Louvre.”

“Sorry,” he said. His hands returned to his sides. “But I put a lot of work into it. So I’d like it to make it to opening night.” He grinned at me. “Perhaps you could keep your mitts to yourself until then?” he teased.

I bit the inside of my cheek as I bent over, squinting at the piece. I took a step back and he moved out of the way before I stumbled into him.

“You did this?” I asked, looking closely at the detail. How many strokes of charcoal sticks must this have taken? I couldn’t begin to guess. I’d never been much of an artist, unless we’re talking first-grade macaroni stuff. I’d been thoroughly impressed by my work back then. But since? I didn’t have any hands-on experience.

“This must have taken forever,” I mumbled while pulling a small notepad and pen from my purse. “What techniques did you use?
“It took a while. The things that matter generally do in my experience.” He stepped beside me, entranced with his masterpiece. “For the most part I used blending and shading, except for here.” He pointed to the area surrounding the hands. There were fine lines making creases, leading into the palms of the hands. “I wanted those to be clear cut. However, the ball of darkness in her hands, that’s all blended. It’s supposed to be messy, uncontrollable even. That’s how darkness works, right?” He looked down at me. I shook my head. How was I supposed to know? “Then around here.” He looked back to the piece, pointing to the corners and the dark shadow around the hands. “That’s all shading. I wanted it to be darker than the hands, but still somewhat light.”

I leaned in closer, the canvas a few inches from my face. “Don’t worry, I’m not touching it,” I said, smirking as I examined the techniques. The lines were perfect. Every stroke was intentional. Every inch of black shading served a purpose.

I looked down at the plaque sitting on the floor. The piece was titled The Secret. The artist’s name was familiar. “Marco Bonaventura . . . Bona . . . wait a second.” I turned quickly, facing him, tripping over my feet. He reached out, grabbing and steadying me before I landed on his mural.

“That was close,” he joked.

“As in Bonaventura Industries?” His hands were still resting on my arms as I stared at him.

“Are you only asking because I’m Italian?” he asked, his lips curved up, his eyes locked on mine.
“Your last name is Bonaventura. I haven’t met many people with that name in Chicago as of late.” I shook myself free of his gaze and his grip. That’s when it clicked, I knew where I’d seen him before. The newspaper. Multiple times even. They have a son somewhere around, what twenty-five now? University of Chicago graduate. I looked back at the piece of art plastered on the wall beside us, feeling idiotic. “They must be thrilled that their son, the heir to the Bonaventura Industries throne, is an artist.”

“Yeah, it’s not like I could be something worse. Like a criminal. Or a politician.” He tilted his head, shrugging. “But no, artist is certainly at the bottom of their list.”

“You’re saying they don’t have a problem with it?”

“Contrary to popular belief, not all parents are assholes.” He walked towards the back and I followed. “They want me to be happy.”

“Are you?” I asked as he walked through a door labeled Break Room in cursive decal.

Once inside, he held the door open for me as I entered. The room was adorned with modern furniture in black and grey hues. He let go of the door and approached the coffee machine as I wrote, Happy?

“Is anyone?”

“I think people try to convince themselves they are.”

“That’s rather pessimistic,” he said, holding out a styrofoam cup of coffee for me. I shook my head. He shrugged, taking it for himself.
“That’s life,” I said, smiling insincerely as I sat in a chair at a small table. I set my notebook on it, my pen in my hand, scribbling descriptors of my interviewee: Chivalrous, Confident, and Attractive.

He sat across from me, legs crossed, the coffee in his hand. He took a sip from it every few seconds, peering over the cup at me.

“When did you first get into art?” I asked, looking over questions I’d written in preparation for this meeting.

He answered, describing his visit to the Smithsonian at five years old as more of a brief history lesson, rather than a memory. I hadn’t visited many places in my life outside of Chicago and Kansas, my home state, but I could describe each place in detail: how I felt being there, who I was with, when it happened. It wasn’t until he described the piece of art that had stuck with him all these years that he showed any enthusiasm at all. It was called Electronic Super Highway by an artist whose name he had to spell out for me.

“I’ll have to look it up later.”

“Yes, put a picture in your paper.” He peeked at my notes. “Next to: likes to joke.”

I glanced over my notes. “I didn’t write that,” I said, looking back at him.

He smiled. “No, but I’m sure you will.”

“I’m more likely to put: doesn’t do interviews well.”

He shook his head, leaning over in his chair, closer to me, smiling wide. “No, that would be you. I’m sweet as pie in an interview. You’re the one who’s ice cold.”
“I think I might quote that,” I said. A grin, defeating my best efforts, slid onto my lips.

“Go ahead,” he said, his mouth mirroring mine.

I looked at my questions again, clearing my throat, getting back to business.

“How many of your pieces have been exhibited?”

“Seventeen exhibited. Seventeen sold,” he said.

I jotted down, *Certainly not humble*.

“Wow,” I looked up at him, eyes wide, pen tip stabbed into the paper. Why hadn’t I known that? You’d think someone with so many pieces of art being sold would have more articles about him. “Doesn’t that mean you should be more renowned?”

He snickered, then said, “I *am* renowned. Perhaps you don’t keep up with art news as well as you thought you did?”

I squinted at him. “My class is *art history*. As in the *history* of *art*. So far what we’ve covered has not been contemporary.”

He stared at me, scanning my face. “Of course.”

I glanced away, clearing my throat while I shifted in my seat. “Your parents, do they come to these events?”

“Yes, as I told you, they want me to be happy. To be who I am, and they support me.”

I nodded. I wished I could relate. My parents loved me, I knew that. However, my father had this idea about how I should live my life, regardless of my opinion, desires, or
dreams. It’s always been whatever he wants, I had better want it as well. *Supportive parents*, I scribbled in my notes.

We went over a dozen more questions, most about his upbringing, his art, the beginning of it, where he got inspired most, and how long he’d been selling it. Afterwards, we sat awkwardly, my hands in my lap fiddling with the pen, his hands cupped around his coffee and his eyes on me.

I stared back at him, but after a moment he stood and tossed his empty coffee cup in the trash.

“Any other questions?” he asked.

“No, I think that’s it,” I said. My body tired as I rose and stuck my notepad and pen in my purse. “Thank you for the interview.”

“Actually,” he said, stepping towards me. “I have a couple questions for you.”

I laughed awkwardly. “I promise you, my life is nowhere near as exciting as yours.”

“I’ll be the one to judge that,” he said, stopping a couple feet from me, leaning on the wall directly by the door.

I eyed him. “What do you want to know?”

“Well, first question, have you always been pessimistic?” I shook my head, attempting to walk past him, but he stepped in front of my exit. His perfectly straight, white teeth shone in the light as he smiled wide. “I can’t believe someone as beautiful as you, as young and smart as you are, could have just been born this way. How did it happen?”
“Next question,” I said, stepping back with my arms firmly pressed across my chest.

“Fine.” He bit his lip, his eyes squinting as he came up with another question. “What are you going to school for?” he asked, reaching his hands up and pushing into the top of the doorframe, his shirt rising, exposing his toned lower abdomen. I looked away, my nails digging into my elbows.

“Rocket science, next question.”

He shook his head, smiling, “I’ve always found that honesty is a good policy.”

“You don’t think I could be a rocket scientist?” I batted my eyelashes at him. “I thought you said I was smart? Because you apparently know me so well.”

“Okay, I may not know you, but from what I’ve observed, you aren’t unintelligent.” His eyes darted to my purse, then back to my face, and he stared for a few seconds before saying, “I’d peg you for journalism, maybe business, but I can’t see your attitude giving you much of an advantage there.” After a few seconds of silence from my end, he probed, “Was I close?”

“Next question. I’d like to get out of here sometime tonight.”

“Fine. Last question: would you go out to dinner with me?”

I shook my head, eyes wide, and brows drawn together. “You can’t be serious.”

“Why wouldn’t I be serious?”

“Look, just . . . don’t waste your time,” I said. I pushed him aside as I squeezed through the small space between his side and the door frame, rushing for the exit.
“I have to say, there aren’t many women who’ve said no to me,” he said, following on my heels.

I turned the lock on the door and opened it wide, saying to him over my shoulder, “Thank you for the interview.”

“Wait,” he said, stepping out into the cold winter air after me.

“What?” I asked, facing him.

“The exhibit premieres Friday evening at eight. If you have the opportunity, you should come.” He stepped towards me, his hand outstretched.

I wanted to say something, anything, but the words wouldn’t come out. So, I shook his hand and nodded, then turned and hurried towards my car parked two blocks away. My heart pumped at an alarming rate as I checked over my shoulder every few seconds to make sure he hadn’t followed me. I unlocked the door, jumped inside the driver’s side seat, and started the car. Music blared through it, vibrating into my body. I leaned my head against the steering wheel, holding back tears, taking in deep, sharp breaths.

With shaky hands, I pulled a pill bottle from the center console and took two capsules to ease the storm of a headache that was coming on.

I’d never been *that* girl. The one who turns people away so rudely. However, at this point, it was better to push people away before someone got hurt. Because isn’t that how all of this was bound to end? Wasn’t that fate?

The next evening at work, I was in the middle of cleaning tables when a group of guys shouting and laughing came in. I looked up just in time to meet Marco’s eyes
among them. He watched me while walking to the register. As I watched him, something clicked inside and I realized this was where I’d seen him before. He was a semi-regular, coming in every few weeks, causing my coworkers to fawn over his beauty. Had he realized this before me?

I set down my towel and cleaning solution, then went behind the counter to meet him. “What are you doing here?” I asked. I took off my gloves and tucked them in a cubby.

“I didn’t know you worked here.” He put his hands up in mock surrender.

“Scout’s honor,” he said, letting a hand down and keeping three fingers on his other hand pointed up.

“That’s not what I asked.”

“Well, I was out with my friends, who happen to live nearby, and I wanted some coffee . . . as people tend to sometimes.”

“Fine,” I said, jaw clenched as I looked down at the register. “That’s one dollar and thirty cents.” I punched in the order.

“Here,” he said, handing me a twenty-dollar bill. “Keep the change.”

“I’m not keeping the change,” I said, counting it out before setting it on the counter in front of him. “Here.” I set the to-go cup on top of it.

“Little Miss Sunshine.” He smiled, grabbing only the cup. “Put it in the tip jar or something.”

“I’m not your charity case.”
“I never thought you were.” He shook his head, leaving the change behind. He poured his self-serve coffee and walked back to his group of friends.

With a sour taste in my mouth, I gathered his change off the counter and dropped it into the tip jar.

An hour later, we were closing. Marco and his friends remained in the corner of the café conversing loudly.

I finished up my duties, leaving my coworker to lock up, and walked out the back exit. But luck was never on my side.

“Wait up,” I heard him yell, not far behind me.

“What are you doing?” I asked, whipping around to face him. “Just leave me alone. Can’t you take a very blatant hint?”

“No,” he said, approaching me, a sly smile spread across his face. “Apparently not.” I shook my head, furious. “Why don’t you like me?” he asked, stopping a foot in front of me.

“I don’t know you,” I said, turning around and continuing towards my dorm room.

“Well, you stopped for me, so I guess you must not hate me. Or at least you aren’t afraid of me.” He looked over his shoulder, walking beside me. “It’s ten at night and a guy chases after you when there are barely any lights in sight, or people for that matter, and you’re not scared? Why is that?”
“Because you don’t scare me.” Not much does these days. I wrapped my arms tightly across my chest, trying to keep warm. I looked up at him. “Why can’t you leave me alone? What’s your fascination with me?”

He smirked, looking ahead of us. “I like puzzles.”

“I’m not a puzzle. Just a girl who isn’t interested in whatever it is you’re after.”

“What if I just want to be your friend?”

“Do you?” I asked, still eying him.

“I don’t know. Do you treat all your friends like this?”

I stopped. We stood in front of the steps leading to the brick dormitory where I had a single dorm to myself. I glanced up. “This is me.”

“Do you always avoid answering questions, too?”

“What can I say? I’m a private gal.”

He bit his lip, grinning at me. After a few seconds, he shook his head. “I don’t think that’s it.”

“Because you can read me so well?” I asked, turning around and heading up the stairs.

“I think you’re hiding something. Something about yourself that you don’t want to share with other people. Maybe you’re afraid. Maybe you’re ashamed. I don’t know. But I don’t think it’s me. Or anyone else for that matter. I think it’s all you.”

I stopped at the top of the steps as he climbed them, my hand on the doorknob.

“Am I right?” he asked from behind me.
I turned around to face him. He was a step lower than me, bringing his face in direct line with mine. “You don’t know me.” I shook my head, staring into his eyes. “You haven’t completely figured me out in five seconds. You aren’t a profiler analyzing me, picking apart everything I say and do. You’re a young, egotistical jerk who won’t take no for an answer. You create excuses in your mind for why someone doesn’t like you when it could be plain and simple: maybe I just don’t like you.”

I turned, but he reached out, grasping onto my arm, and facing me towards him again. “I don’t believe you.”

My body froze. I wasn’t afraid of him. He was right about that. Maybe I should have been, because I knew what he was going to do and for some stupid reason, I didn’t stop him.

He leaned forward, his hands moving up to either side of my face and he kissed me. I stood still, my lips like rock, frozen beneath his warm, smooth lips moving against mine.

He pulled back after a second of inactivity from my end, his eyes slowly opening, looking into mine. “I guess I was wrong after all.”

“Are you satisfied?” I asked, pulling away.

“Honestly? No.” He took a step down the stairs in defeat. “I’m pretty sure assault is still frowned upon in most civilized countries, including this one.”

I looked away, shaking my head. “You weren’t wrong.”

“I sure feel wrong,” he said, his eyebrows raised as he took another step back.
“You’re persistent, annoying, and a real pain in my ass, but you weren’t wrong. About me, okay?” I stared at the nearby shrubbery, wishing I would just jump into it like a rabbit, hide away from the conversation that was about to take place. “I don’t open up. I do hide away. And I like it that way.”

“Why?” he asked, leaning on the rail of the stairs while people passed us by. Once they were gone, I said, “Because it’s the only way I know how to protect people.”

“Don’t you mean protect yourself?”

“I meant what I said.” I sat down on the cold top step, leaning my head against the rail.

He leaned down and sat in front of me, his legs extended along the step he was on, horizontally. “Protect them from what?”

I shook my head and let out a small laugh. Not enough time or reason to share that information. “Next question, please.”

He looked up at me for the first time since he’d kissed me. “I don’t want to ask you another question, Lexa. I want to know why you are pushing me away before you’ll even give me a chance.”

“I don’t want to talk about it.” I stared back into his eyes. They brought a warmth to me that made me want to be honest with him. But I couldn’t. “Just leave it at that. You’re better off without me. Or, it’s not you, it’s me.”

His jaw clenched, then after a moment, eased up, into a smile even. “Fifty shades of fucked up, huh?”
I laughed, loudly. “Did you really just say that?”

“And she laughs,” he said, smiling wide. “Is that it?”

“Something like that.” I snickered, my hand shooting up to my mouth, trying to muffle the sound.

He smiled, watching me. The laughter quickly fading from my lips. While any other guy might make me uncomfortable with the way he had acted, he only made me embarrassed, and nervous.

“I have another question,” he said, his eyes squinting at me. “You graduate this spring? What do you plan on doing afterwards?”

I sighed. “I’m supposed to graduate this spring . . .”

“And your plans?”

“And that’s it.” I stood up to head inside.

“Don’t go.” He reached out for me.

“It’s freezing out here,” I said, grabbing the door and opening it wide. He got up and followed me into the entryway. “What you’re doing is called stalking.”

“Just answer one more question. Please.”

My hands balled into fists beside me. “Why won’t you just let this go?”

“Because I don’t understand you. You joke with me, almost like you’re flirting, but then when I am clearly interested in you, you cut me out. Why can’t you just be honest with me?”

“Because I don’t know you!”

“Then give me a chance,” he said, shrugging.
“No,” I said, turning to leave. He grabbed my arm, holding me back. I faced him again, finally pissed off. “What do you want me to say?” I stared at him, his eyes wide as I continued, “I’m not going to live to see my graduation. I’m not going to become a journalist. I won’t travel the world or fall in love. And there’s nothing I can do about it. So I just want to live my life in peace until then.”

“What are you talking about?” he asked, his eyebrows furrowed.

I looked away, not able to meet his eyes. “I have a brain tumor. Inoperable. Too massive to be destroyed with chemo.” I couldn’t force myself to look back up as his grip loosened on my arm, then fell away. “That’s why I can’t give you a chance. And it’s why I won’t let you in.” I stepped back, my gaze still on the floor. “So please, have a nice, long life, Marco.”

I turned and opened the door.

From behind me, he let out an exasperated, “Wait.”

I couldn’t say anything more. My cheeks burned and I knew it wouldn’t be long before I’d be a blubbering mess. This wasn’t the life I wanted. This wasn’t how I’d imagined it. In a different world, this could’ve worked. This could’ve been the start to something beautiful and life-changing. But in this world, it was just a death sentence. Literally.

“You know,” he said. I heard him go down the stairs. “It wouldn’t kill you any faster if you went to the show on Friday.”

I turned my face ever-so-slightly, and caught his silhouette walking away.

Monday morning, I sat with my hands in my lap, lost in thought.
I had never seen the Aurora Borealis in my lifetime. Or Buckingham Palace. The Eiffel Tower. The Great Wall of China. Hell, even stateside I hadn’t seen much. When I was young, I saw the biggest ball of twine in the world, but that was close to home in Kansas. It wasn’t anything particularly special. It had been large. But I was ten years old. I just wanted to go to the damn zoo. However, my father had been in charge of our outing that day. As he had been most days.

There I was, twenty-one years old, sitting in a neurologist’s office, my father on my right, my mother on my left. I knew I should’ve been paying attention, but I couldn’t. I kept thinking of all the stuff I hadn’t done yet. The things that I would never get to do.

“Lexa, did you hear me?” Doctor Phillips asked, tapping the desk in front of me. His hands lay atop a brochure titled “Hospice and the End-Stage Cancer Patient.” The word’s “End-Stage” kept floating through my mind like debris in the ocean, swirling in the water around the little island I was resting on.

“Lexa?” my dad asked, laying his hand on my arm.

“No,” I said, my mind somewhere else, looking up at the doctor. I shook my head. “I mean, yes.” I reached out and grabbed the brochure, clutching it tightly in my hands, looking down but my mind already drifting to something else.

My mother wept loudly beside me, a handkerchief pressed up against her mouth and nose, barely muffling the sound.

She began to say, “She’s so young, isn’t there . . .”

Then I was back to the things I’d never done. I had always wanted to lie on the beach in Hawaii. I bet you felt like a million bucks laying there in that sand, no matter
what your financial situation actually was. Hundreds of thousands tiny, cold rocks against your skin, the ocean water creeping up onto the shore, touching just your toes at first, but as the current grows stronger, it gets higher and higher up your legs until it swallows you whole. I’d rather be doing that.

I looked around the room. The doctor was still talking, but there was a bookshelf behind him that my eyes focused on instead. He had many books about tumors and cancer. I’d seen four doctors over the course of the last six months. Each saying the same thing. The tumor in my brain was too complex, too invasive. There was nothing they could do, and I didn’t have much time left. A few months at most.

The headaches started nearly four years ago, and I had been secretly medicating myself so my parents wouldn’t find out. I’d assumed it was from stress of school, boyfriends, and life, in general. Looking back, I probably should’ve just told my parents.

My dad was standing now, behind me and my mother, one hand resting on each of our shoulders, rubbing them. I wanted to ask why. But I knew better. He thought he was consoling us. But I didn’t need consoling. I needed freedom. I needed to get the hell out of here.

“Lexa, do you have any questions?” Doctor Phillips asked, standing in front of me. I stood up, startled. When had he moved?

“No,” I shook my head at him.

He nodded, reached out his hand and firmly grasped onto mine. “Then I’ll see you back for your next appointment.”

I looked into his eyes. They were nice, an ocean blue.
My dad said, “Yes, we’ll see you in a couple weeks.”

He pulled on my shoulder, directing me to leave the office with him, my mother under his other arm, still crying. I felt like mentioning the fact that she wasn’t the one dying, but I refrained. It’d only hurt her worse.

While Dad walked us to the car my eyes drifted over the scenery. The big, new innovative concrete building we were leaving behind, the shrubbery around the outskirts, and the pink-leaved trees planted along the sidewalk every ten feet on each side.

We reached the car, my dad opened my door to the backseat on the driver’s side, then ushered me in the small black Prius. I sat in the back, wringing my hands in my lap while my parents got into the front.

“Lexa, you’ve barely said a word,” my mom said, looking into the back, over her shoulder from the front side passenger seat while dabbing the cloth at her cheeks. “Is your head hurting?”

I shook my head and she turned her gaze, looking to my father. He shrugged, starting the car.

“What would you like for lunch?” he asked, his hazel eyes locking onto mine through the rearview mirror.

“Chili’s,” I said, looking out the window as he put the car in drive and nodded.

I almost always chose Chili’s. I knew their menu, the staff knew me, and it had become a place of habit. My parents were sick of Chili’s. I knew that by the disgruntled looks on their faces every time I suggested it. But honestly, I didn’t care. Maybe once I
was gone they’d never go to another Chili’s again. But while I was here, I was going to eat the food that I wanted and enjoy my time.

My mom and dad weren’t with me when I’d first learned of my diagnosis. I had been away at college, seeing my doctor in secret because I didn’t want to worry them. But then they were there for every appointment after I’d told them. They had been optimistic that my doctor was an imbecile at first, but he wasn’t. None of them had been. But that optimism never truly faded. They’d turned to their faith, praying three times daily at least. They’d even become active members of their local Baptist church again.

As for my faith? I didn’t know much about it. I’d never had it before, and it certainly hadn’t touched me in the way that it had my parents after. When I died, I didn’t want to be stuck in an eternal hell, but I wouldn’t just get into heaven out of fear of dying. I knew that, too. I didn’t have the faith that “true” Christians, or religious people of any type, had. I had faith in the known. I knew I had a tumor so entwined around the base of my brain that it was almost beautiful. I knew that it meant I was going to die. I knew I was in my senior year at the University of Chicago. I knew I wasn’t going to live to see my graduation. I knew I’d never have children. Or get married. Or travel the world.

But God? I didn’t know much about Him. Or Her. I just knew what I’d heard, both the good and the bad. Other than that, I was completely lost on the whole concept. Did that mean if there was a heaven I wouldn’t get in? By many religious standards, yes. Did that scare me? Honestly? Not much scared me anymore.

The dinner went fast with little-to-no chit-chat during the meal. Most of our meals had been this way. In fact, most of our time together mirrored that same deathly silence.
That Friday, I sat down to another funeral-esque gathering with food, or dinner as my parents called it. As my mother walked around the table picking up plates, my dad wiped the meat loaf grease from his trimmed goatee and asked how classes had been going.

I chose the honest route. “Wouldn’t know,” I said, leaning back in my chair as my father’s eyes widened.

“Lexa, you can’t just skip out in your final semester. It’s not over yet.”

“Oh, no, you think they’ll fail the dying girl?” I asked, using the table to push myself up.

“You think you’re funny?” he shouted.

“I think I’m dying, Dad. Whatever points they’re going to dock me for missing a class here and there will not matter three months from now.”

His jaw clenched, and my mom howled nearby in tears, clinging to the cross hanging from her neck.

“See that?” He gestured to her. “Now you’ve made your mother cry. I hope you’re happy.”

I couldn’t even look at him as he ran to my mother’s side to console her. I knew the look on his face all too well. Frustration, disappointment, confusion as to how he’d raised such a careless, selfish daughter so concerned with her own death and dying that she completely disregards her family’s feelings.

I ran upstairs to my room, gathering the things I’d just unpacked an hour ago. My backpack spilled open with my notebook atop the mess. It was still open from Tuesday
night, when I’d used the notes in my report for class. Some of the words and quotes scribbled across the paper stood out:

“Messy, uncontrollable.”

“They want me to be happy.”

“Pessimistic.”

“Friday evening at eight.”

“Protect them from what?”

Hands wrapped around a ball of darkness filled my mind. Marco’s face as I told him about my prognosis. His broken spirit and admitted defeat as I walked away.

I went to the bed, grabbed my suitcase, and stuffed it as quickly as I could manage. My fingers shook, and short bursts of lightning shot through my head, front to back.

Five minutes later I was walking out my bedroom door and down the stairs, past my parents in the living room, curled up on the couch talking to each other quietly. Chances were good that I’d be back by next weekend, and every weekend after that forever. Or until forever ends I guess.
October 1st, 2017

Harper,

Your funeral was two weeks ago, today. My therapist says that writing about it, about you, is necessary. He says it will help. That it will get easier to talk about.

I think he’s full of shit.

Mom

October 4th, 2017

The sun was out today, briefly. It hurt my eyes when I let the dog outside this morning. She took longer than usual, basking in the warmth I realized. I stood in the doorway envious.

October 7th, 2017

I crawled between your soft blue sheets last night when I couldn’t sleep. The bed I share with your father was soaked with too many tears.

October 10th, 2017

Your poor sister is too young to understand. She forgets and asks where you are, and I freeze. She mentions your name, everyone does, and I become a statue: still and unreachable.
October 12th, 2017

I prayed today. For you. For me. For all of us, your family. I prayed for a while. Asking things of a God that I don’t even know to exist. I prayed because I didn’t know what else to do.

October 15th, 2017

This morning, after I let the dog out, and kissed your father, brother, and sister goodbye, I went into your room and sat on your bed. I stayed there for a long time, taking in the room as you did every morning when you woke. I picked up a sweatshirt that had been lying beneath your bed for over a month and slipped it on. It was a secondhand Queen sweatshirt that you’d picked up at Goodwill, but it smelled like you.

October 16th, 2017

I had a dream about you last night.

You were here, and everything was normal.

And then I woke. And you weren’t here. And nothing will ever feel normal again.

October 18th, 2017

I have a hard time admitting it to myself even though it’s been a month. But a month is not long enough for the pain to subside. Not long enough for the memories, reminders, and thoughts to stop surrounding me. Not long enough to accept that you’re gone.
October 19th, 2017

I don’t want to think about the reality of your life. Of the fact that there are things I did not know about you—my son. Of the minutes of your life that you hated so much that you did not want to live.

Or was it hours? Days?

How long had this consumed you right under my nose?

October 20th, 2017

Every day, when I wake up, clean the house, make dinner, talk to our family, and go to sleep, I have to remind myself that the world is not as it used to be. Everything is not the same. My life has entirely changed.

You are dead.

You’re dead.

You’re dead, Harper.

I have to get used to saying it. That’s what my therapist tells me. So, when I am alone, I repeat it like a mantra. I hate it, but I say it anyway. I say it until there is no air left in my lungs.

And then I say it some more.
October 22nd, 2017

Your little brother got expelled from school today. He nearly beat the life out of a kid for telling him to—to copy his brother. To do what you did. Your father had to pick him up. I couldn’t breathe. Or move. Or process the cruelty of other children.

Are you proud? Is this what you wanted?

No.

I know it isn’t. I know that. I just . . . I don’t understand this world. I don’t understand you. Or them. Or why this is the way things are now.

October 23rd, 2017

When your father is pressed against my back at night weeping into my tired shoulders, I want to scream out and ask you why you left us like this. Why you didn’t tell us why. Why you felt there was no other option. But all I can do is cry with his arms wrapped around my waist, holding me together.

I don’t know if you know this, but we cried the day you were born, too. You were our first child, the reason for our being. You were beautiful, vibrant, and life suited you.

October 25th, 2017

Are you there? Are you on the other side reading every word I write for you? I have written thousands of words for you. You know that, don’t you? Because you should.
October 26th, 2017

Everything hurts all the time. Everything I do. Everything I say. It all feels empty without you here. And not just because you’re gone, but because you left. You chose to be gone. And I don’t know how to live knowing that I wasn’t enough to keep you here. That none of us were.

There are an endless number of things that should have grounded to this world: your father, your little brother and your baby sister, your future, your friends, me—all of it should have been enough. But it wasn’t.

And now you’re gone and I’m trying to find meaning in it. The problem is, I don’t know how to without you here.

October 27th, 2017

Why couldn’t you have talked to me? What did I fail to do as your mother? Should I have seen the signs, gotten you help? Was I too busy? Did you think that? Did you honestly believe that I wouldn’t have helped you or done everything in my power to save you? How could you believe that?

I was your lifeline. I gave you blood and skin and teeth and bones. I grew you from a smudge on the ultrasound to a smart, kind, beautiful young boy of sixteen years old. I held your hand in emergency rooms when you broke your leg, then your wrist, and later fractured your skull. You were a rambunctious child who required my full attention 24/7 and I gave it to you. I loved you.

*I love you.*
So why did you leave?

October 28th, 2017

I don’t know how to cope with the loss of you. The loss, as if I misplaced you somewhere and someday I will magically find you. I didn’t lose you. You ran away from this world screaming. You accused it of something so horrible that it could never bring you back to me. How could it? When you killed yourself just to get away?

What did we do to you, Son? My baby. My child. What did we do to make you run?

Why couldn’t I take your broken pieces and put them back together? I would have done anything for you.

Why didn’t you know that?

October 29th, 2017

My therapist tells me that there are answers in this world that we will never have. Answers that don’t matter much anyway. Because the results are the same regardless.

You’re gone. What I can do now is grow from it. That’s what he says.

And it’s bullshit.

How am I ever going to wake up in the morning, look around the kitchen table covered in papers and food, and ignore the fact that my sixteen-year-old son is gone?

Not gone. Dead.
October 30th, 2017

For the first time in a while, I said your name aloud. Well, I yelled it actually. Your siblings wanted to dress as you for Halloween. How absurd! I got so angry, even though I knew they meant well. They just miss you. And I can’t fault them for wanting to honor you.

I hear them crying at night when reality won’t let them sleep. I hear them murmur your name and tiptoe into your room. I find them in the morning, curled together atop your blankets, clutching onto things that were once yours.

Instead of dressing as you, I allowed them to dress as the things you loved. Your sister opted for Princess Peach, because of the retro Mario poster that adorns your lifeless room. Your brother dressed as Prince, in purple of course, to honor one of your favorite artists along with your favorite color.

November 1st, 2017

Last Halloween you dressed up as Peter Pan, using your old theater costume, do you remember? Do you remember your little sister covering her blue Wendy dress in chocolate fingerprints after you snuck candy into her room and stayed with her late in the night, whispering over sweet treats? Do you remember your brother’s face in the morning when he saw how little candy was left? Do you remember mine?

Last night, when we went trick or treating, they held an extra bag for you. I know it was a waste, but we left it on your gravestone today. They insisted, and who was I to tell them no?
November 3rd, 2017

I went to your high school today. They’d called me for the fifth time in two weeks. They wanted me to come clean out your belongings from your locker. The principal walked me there, polite, but quiet.

In front of your locker lay a shrine with flowers, pictures, and candles. The flowers were dead, and the candles had burned so long that no wick remained, but the sentiment was the same.

I stood there for a while reading the messages that students and teachers left for you. So many of them said, “You’ll be missed,” “I wish I could’ve helped you,” and were signed “with love,” but I got so angry as I stood there staring at messages from people I’d never met. From people you’d never spoken about. From children who never really knew you at all.

They wouldn’t miss you. They didn’t want to help you. They didn’t love you.

But I would. I will. For the rest of my life I will love and miss you.

I both hated and was envious of them because they would never know the pain that I felt over you. But here, reading these, they all pretended that they would.

November 6th, 2017

I know I won’t get a response, as I never got a letter or a note to explain this in the first place. But I need to have it out there. I need to believe that you are reading my words from the other side, answering me in my dreams. Because, Son, I am broken.
I tried to give your life meaning. And your death. But the thing is, a lot of people can’t find meaning in suicide. It’s selfish, they say. It’s cowardly, too. And even though I never thought of you, my son, as cowardly or selfish, their words stick with me like needles in a pincushion.

I have two children and a husband who are looking to me for comfort and guidance during this time and I have no words to console them. I have no words to make the pain any less for them than it is for me. I have no words to describe the feeling of losing you, of not being able to save you, of letting you slip between my fingers without a chance of getting you back.

I have no words.

November 10th, 2017

When you were six years old, we went to the store, your leg in a cast. I sat you in the cart, pushed you around, and bought you candy. Six years old, and you told me you’d love me forever, and I believed you. Because I knew that I would love you forever, too.

And, sweetie, wherever you are, I still do.

November 12th, 2017

I still wake up every morning and forget that you’re gone for a brief second. And then it all comes rushing back. A little over a month ago, you took your life and not just from yourself, but you took it from me. Something that I shared with you. And you took it and I can’t help it, but I am angry every morning that I wake up. I’m angry that you
took something that I loved so much. Something that I created. Something that I would’ve given my own life for. I’m so angry and then I’m so sad that I can’t breathe.

Your neck didn’t break when you jumped from that chair with that rope around your throat. And every morning when I can’t breathe I know that this must’ve been what you felt like every day of your life.

November 14th, 2017

I started going through your things today. I doubt I’ll be able to part with a single thing, but I wanted to know you better, to feel what you felt.

So, I sat at your desk all day reading your notebooks, journals, and books. I flipped through, looking for personal notes, things that you wrote that held meaning. I was hoping that they would help, give me answers. Answers to questions that I’ll probably always have.

While I didn’t get the ones I was looking for, I did find out that you liked to write. You wrote so much, and I don’t know how I never noticed. Most of it was poetry, very beautiful and full of hope. I tried to find hidden meanings, things that might’ve shown me what was missing from your life. But among the rainbows, hearts, and stars, I found only love. A love of life and family.

November 16th, 2017

I have no experience with poetry. I know nothing of its beauty or hidden meanings. I only know that as I sit on your bed, flipping through your journals filled with
strange, but beautiful and honest words, I love you more. And with every second that passes here, I know that I am learning more about you than ever before. And it’s sad to me that I only know this side of you now. Would this moment be different if we’d shared it together just a few moons ago?

Would you be here reading these words to me instead?

There is a sparrow,
statuesque upon a branch
outside my window
counting down the seconds,
speaking in tongues,
begging for silence
and revealed secrets,
as she sleep-talks
through the sunset.

I don’t know exactly what it all means. If it meant anything to you. If there were secrets that you kept from me. If there were things you did not want me to know. I don’t know, and I don’t know if it matters that I don’t.

November 17th, 2017

I wish that I could, but I don’t know if I’ll ever know why you did what you did.

As I learn more about you and the things I didn’t know before, I only have more
questions that I know will never be answered. Someday, I hope that I will be able to accept that.

November 20th, 2017

I doubt that I will ever find solace in your death. You being gone does not bring anything to me except pain and heartbreak, but only because I loved you more than I understood how. I know this isn’t about me, though. It’s about you, and what you were missing in life that you thought you’d never find. Even though it’s all that I can do right now, I have accepted that you are gone.

The only problem with accepting it though, is not knowing where that leaves me now.

November 23rd, 2017

This was our first Thanksgiving without you. Our first time going around the table and skipping over your spot. The first year that I won’t hear what you are thankful for. I keep imagining what you would have said. The things I’d heard you say throughout the year but didn’t get to say today as we sat together thankful for the little things.

“I am thankful for Mr. Evans, the best theater director Adams High has ever had.”

“I am thankful for my parents and little brother and sister . . . some days.”

“I am thankful to be alive.”
I know it’s selfish of me to think some of these things. I know it’s selfish to wish you were still here, even though you were in pain. And I know it’s selfish to take all of the blame for your decision.

But then again, maybe we were both a little selfish.

November 26th, 2017

Harper,

The thing is, I don’t know what was in your mind when you did what you did. But if you didn’t know this already, I hope you’re at peace. Even though you left. I hope that you’re happy wherever you are.

I don’t know how to live without you and I don’t want to, honestly. But I will. Because as much as I love you, I love them, too. The rest of our family. I love them so much that it also hurts. But I’ll keep doing it, like I wish you had.

I hope that you’ll watch after us, your family. The people who loved you. Who love you. Because we will always love you, Son.

Love,

Your mother
The Other Side of Blood

I’ve always hated the phrase, “blood is thicker than water.” It’s one of the many things about this world that I’ve never understood. Because while family is something that should theoretically be clear cut, it’s not. Not really. I understand that family comes first, but why does it end with blood? You can make more along the way, right? My understanding was always that you would. Whether it be by marriage, having children, gaining cousins, nieces, and nephews, or whatever. You grow in life, and so does your lineage. And isn’t how it comes to be what really matters?

Everyone goes through shit growing up, that’s a fact. Some of it’s good shit, and the other stuff? Well, that’s where the story is, isn’t it?

For a long time, my boyhood had been the epitome of good. I had a mom and a dad who loved me. No creepy uncles, or overly nosy neighbors. I was an only child for a long time and I liked it that way. There were bumps for sure, but looking back, I wouldn’t have wanted it any other way.

When I was four, a family moved in next door. They were like mine: a dad, a mom, and a little boy—same age as me. His name was Charlie and he liked fire trucks, the color yellow, and peanut butter and banana sandwiches; and he was my best friend.

Charlie was a scrawny, blond kid who always had candy in his pockets. The first day I met him, his parents came over to introduce themselves and he pulled a green Jolly Rancher out of his pocket and held it out to me as an offering of friendship. I took it, though I hated Jolly Ranchers. I liked chocolate, which Charlie later learned, and he
adjusted his candy-carrying routine so that he always had something for me. How he kept it from melting, I still don’t know to this day.

Charlie and I went to the same schools and we had the same teachers. Once we hit middle school we still shared a lot of the same classes. This was good, because especially back then we relied heavily on one another to make it through the days.

“Jack!” Charlie shouted to me from across the room. He waved me to our randomly selected cafeteria table.

“Hey,” I said as I set my heavy, full tray down. “How was pre-algebra?”

Through a mouthful of noodles, Charlie responded, “Meh.” He shrugged, swallowed his helping, then added, “Same numbers, different equations.”

I laughed. “I’m not looking forward to the test this Friday.”

Charlie shrugged again. “I’m not worried. I’ve been studying. If you want to borrow my notebook, you can.”

“Nah, I’ll figure it out, man. Thanks.”

“No problem,” Charlie said through burger-filled lips.

“How’s your mom doing?” I asked.

“Oh, you know, she’s happy.”

“And you?”

“I don’t know.” I leaned back, looking up at the fluorescent lights above. “I guess I just want it to be over.”

“How much longer?”

“About three months I guess. Due date is February 7th.”
“Ugh.” Shivers ran through me. “I really hope my parents don’t decide to add another one to the family, too.”

“It won’t be so bad. Sure, it’s a crying, stinking baby, but it’s like eleven years younger than me. I’ll be out of the house in seven. Living the good life. Video games, Cheetos, and as much TV as I want, all the time.”

I snorted. “Yeah, I’m sure that’s exactly what being an adult is like.”

“It will be for me! Man, I’ll do whatever I want, whenever I want. My parents won’t have a say. I’ll be out of the house. It’ll be awesome.” Charlie smiled as he finished the last of the macaroni and cheese on his tray.

“Keep telling yourself that.”

These were normal conversations for most of our childhood. We’d talk family, the future, video games, movies, all of it. We talked to each other about everything. When things got really bad, he still told me everything . . . eventually.

And there was a point when things got really bad.

We didn’t get a lot of time after school those days, but his dad was late picking him up again, so we passed the time by playing ball in schoolyard. Charlie tossed the baseball to me. I caught it while running backwards, then stopped and threw it back.

“How’s your mom?”

He shrugged, returned the ball to me.

I sent the ball his way. “Sorry, man.”
He shrugged once more, his signature move those days.

He didn’t want to talk about it. I understood. It was hard losing someone you loved, even if you’d never met them. At least, I understand that now better than I did back then.

“Hey, you wanna come to my house tonight?” I asked.

“Can’t.” He tossed the ball to me.

I missed the catch but followed the ball as it landed at the base of a tree. I picked it up and faced Charlie. “How come?”

“Someone’s gotta be home with her.”

“Oh.” I rolled the ball around in my hands before chucking it back to him. “That sucks.”

“Yeah, sorry.”

“Don’t be. I get it.”

I went home that night to the house that I’d grown up in the last twelve years of my life, while Charlie was going home to his new place. His family had to move to the other side of town after they lost the baby. His mom quit working. Well, she pretty much quit doing everything. Except breathing, but she was just barely doing that.

Charlie’s dad couldn’t afford their old house on his income alone, so they had to get a cheaper place. Thankfully, we lived in a small enough town that I still saw Charlie nearly every day—that is, when he actually showed up to school.

There was only one time that I ever went to Charlie’s house on the other side of town. My mom drove me and waited in the car as I walked up to the dilapidated property.
Charlie hadn’t been to school in a week, and though I wouldn’t admit it to him until much later, I was worried about him.

I knocked three separate times on the door before someone finally opened it. It was Charlie on the other side, his face the same shade of red as his eyes.

“Hey, man—”

“What are you doing here?” he cut me off, looking out at my mom in the car.

“I just wanted—”

“You can’t be here!” he shouted, starting to shut the door.

I slid my foot onto the threshold, blocking the door from closing. “You haven’t been in school—”

“I’ve been busy! You have to go!” Charlie opened the door just enough. There was nothing but frozen pizza boxes and microwaveable dinners littering the small kitchen and the living room was mound after mound of clothes. In fact, the clothes that Charlie was wearing weren’t his. They were five sizes too big. Probably his dad’s.

“Dude, I brought you homework and the teachers—”

“Just go! Please!”

He was embarrassed. Even back then I knew that. He couldn’t look me in the eyes, he tried to block my view of the house, but I was almost a foot taller than him. There was no hiding it from me. And he didn’t have to.

“Charlie, I need to talk to you!”

“I can’t. I’m sorry. You have to go.”
I shoved the papers and books into his hands. He took them reluctantly and shook his head.

“Thank you,” he said, clearly exhausted.

I nodded.

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be.”

I reached out my fist, and after pausing a second, he bumped it and managed a half-smile.

“Dude, I hope you know I’ve always got your back.”

He nodded, silent tears dripping down his face.

“Thanks,” he said almost inaudibly.

I nodded and stepped back outside, turned towards the car and wiped away the moisture from my cheeks.

I didn’t shed tears often throughout my childhood, but when it came to Charlie, he was my weakness. Seeing him suffer so much was harder on me than I ever thought it could be. Especially when there was so little I could do to help him.

Charlie was gone for another week before returning to school.

“Hey, you’re back!” I shouted as he walked slowly down the hallway towards me.

He avoided my eyes, but I could tell they were redder than the last time I’d seen him. The circles that surrounded them told me he hadn’t slept in days. And the frown that he couldn’t attempt to force into something else told me it was bad. Beyond bad.

I tugged his shirt and dragged him off to the side.
“What’s wrong?”

He didn’t say anything. He still couldn’t look at me.

“Are you okay?”

He remained silent. I put a hand on his shoulder. I found it strange that he didn’t pull away out of fear of coming off queer or overly sensitive. It was so unlike him. I stepped closer, but removed my hand.

“Man, talk to me.”

He still wasn’t looking at me, but his shoulders were so slumped I was afraid he might crumble to the ground. They began to shake uncontrollably and before I had time to process what was happening, his head was leaning against my shoulder as his tears soaked through my shirt and wet my skin. My arms were wrapped around him as I pushed us further out of view of other students. It took me a while to get us to a door, but once I did, I immediately opened it and ushered us through.

One hand rubbed his shoulder while the other pulled his face up to look at me.

“Dude, what happened?”

Through tears he blubbered, “My mom . . . she . . . I couldn’t . . . I tried so hard. I tried.”

He was shaking harder. I pulled him back into an embrace and stopped asking questions.

“I tried.”

“I know.”

“I don’t know what I did wrong.”
“You didn’t do anything wrong.”

“They took her away from me.”

He pounded a fist into my chest. In that moment, I was the only thing keeping him from falling as he shook.

“I couldn’t save her!”

There were so many things that I wanted to ask, so many things that I wanted to know. But I would know. In time he would tell me. It took a lot more time than I expected, I admit that. And when he did finally confide in me, he told me just how bad it had been. About how his mother had stopped eating on her own entirely, so he had to be there, to make sure she would eat something, anything. He told me how she wouldn’t move from the bed, not to go to the bathroom or stretch, or anything. He told me that before they took her away, she was hardly a person anymore—just skin and bones. A fleshy shell left behind in the wake of Charlie’s stillborn sister, Emily.

But back in that classroom, I knew nothing. I just held him until he stopped needing it.

When he pulled back, still wiping away the salt from his face, he said, “My dad is sending me to live with my grandma.”

“What?” I shouted the question more than I meant to.

“Social services is making him, he said. Just for a while, he said.” His lips trembled as he fought back more tears. “But he’s full of shit. He’s just fucking done, Jack!”
“Doesn’t your grandma live on the east coast somewhere?” I asked, still trying to process what he was saying.

“Yes! Pittsburgh! He sent my mom away because he couldn’t handle her anymore.” Charlie shook his head, pacing the floor. “Now he’s throwing me away, too.”

“Pennsylvania, that’s at least three states away. You can’t go to Pittsburgh!”

“I don’t exactly have a choice, Jack!”

“We’ll figure something out, Charlie. I’ll figure something out.”

“We better.” Charlie stood still in front of the door. “I can’t go to Pittsburgh.”

I made one stop after school on my way home that night. I knew I wouldn’t be able to do much without my parents’ support, but this was my best shot.

When I got home, I ran past the two of them sitting in the kitchen discussing dinner plans and headed straight to my bedroom. I didn’t have much time to do something big. I knew I needed a plan. And what I came up with, well, it was the best I had in the time we had. After rummaging through my belongings for a good ten minutes, I returned to my parents in the kitchen out of breath with my arms full. They were discussing some topic I can no longer remember as they prepared dinner.

On the island, I set down the largest item first. I pulled the top off an old shoebox to reveal my collection of baseball cards. I didn’t buy much of anything, but what I did invest in were those babies. I had gained hundreds of cards over the previous six years through gifts, trades, and small purchases here and there. Next, I set down my R2-D2 piggy bank that was almost filled to the brim with change and small bills. The last item I placed on the counter was a bank statement of the account my parents opened for me
when I started my paper route. Along with what I’d been depositing from the route, every month I threw in my chore money and the change from my full piggy bank, as well as every dollar I’d received for holidays and birthdays.

After the contents in my arms were fully displayed on the counter, my parents gazed at me over cut-up vegetables with curious expressions.

As calmly as I could manage at that age, I said, “Mom, Dad, Charlie needs our help.”

My dad wiped his hands off on his I love Chefs apron and my mom wiped off hers on her I’m a Chef apron. I wiped the disgust from my face as my dad asked, “What’s up, buddy?”

“Everything okay?” Mom looked at my father, her eyebrows raised.

I sat down at the island counter, my back straight as I delved into my contingency plan to save Charlie.

“As you both know, over the last six years I’ve been saving up for something big. I think it’s time I spent it. On Charlie.”

“Honey, that’s a lot of money to spend on one person . . . what exactly do you want to buy Charlie that’s going to cost that much?”

“I don’t want to buy anything for him, Mom.” I pushed the contents towards them. “You know I have a lot of money here. Thousands that I’ve been saving.”

My mom shot another look at my dad, who promptly asked, “Son, what do you want to do with all that?”
“I want to adopt Charlie. I mean, I want you guys to adopt him. I know it’s expensive to have a kid, and I know this barely puts a dent in it, but you guys can keep my allowance forever. I don’t want any of it. And I’ll give you all my route money. And I don’t need any more gifts, ever. This is my gift, please.”

My parents rounded the island and from either side of me they wrapped their arms around me. My mother kissed my head while my father patted my back softly, repeatedly.

“Oh, Jack,” my mother said, crying. “What did we do to deserve you?”

“Does that mean you’ll do it?”

My parents pulled away and looked at one another.

“Actually, Jack—”

“Dad, I’ll do anything! Please don’t say no.”

“Honey—”

“Mom, please don’t do this. Don’t say no.”

My mother put a finger to my lips. Tears fell. I couldn’t look at her.

“Honey, just listen for a minute.” She sat down beside me, hand on my leg. My father sat on the other side of me, his hand on my shoulder.

“Last week, we called Charlie’s father when we heard through the grapevine what happened. We found out he was sending Charlie to live with his grandmother—”

“He can’t go to Pittsburgh!”

“Honey, just listen,” my mom said, grabbing onto my dad’s hand on my back.

“We wanted to tell you when you both were here,” my dad said, smiling.
“Tell me what?” I asked, gesturing for them to spit it out.

“Charlie’s father is under a lot of stress and agreed to let us take Charlie in. We’ve already spoken with social services. We put in an application to foster Charlie last Friday.” My mom rubbed my back beneath my father’s fingers. “They’re expediting the process since there’s permission, and they believe we’re a fit family to foster him. It’s looking very hopeful, especially because they’d like to keep Charlie here at least for the rest of the school year.”

“So, you mean we’ll be able to do it?”

“We should know by the end of the week, but we hope so.”

I don’t know that I’d ever hugged my parents as much as I did that night. I’m not sure I had ever truly appreciated them enough until that moment, either. Parents do a lot of things for us, but as it turns out, it’s really the big moments that make us realize how much they do for us. At least that’s how it worked for me.

The week went by slow, and I kept checking in with them to see if there’d been any updates, but my god, does the government work slow. They had to fill out boatloads of paper work and take a couple courses in those few days, but by the end of the week they’d gotten the phone call we’d all been waiting for.

Considering the unusual situation, which I understood more and more as I grew older, it didn’t take long for social services to decide that my family was the best fit.

We drove to Charlie’s house that Friday night to tell him. Not only to tell him, but also to bring him home with us, to his new home.
After a conversation filled with happy shouting, hugging, and crying, we came home and went up to what was now our bedroom. Because my parents had a way of doing everything perfectly, on the white door before us, above my name painted in blue was his name painted in yellow.

“I can’t believe I live with you, man.”

“Me neither.” We stepped into the room that we would share for the next six years. A set of bunkbeds were stacked atop each other with two desks opposite of them.

Charlie sat on the lower bed and took in a deep breath. “Do you think she’s happy there?”

It didn’t take me long to realize who he was talking about. I shrugged and sat beside him. “I hope so.”

“I miss her.”

“I’m sure she misses you, too.”

He nodded half-heartedly. “I don’t know if she misses anything anymore. Anything besides Emily.”

“I’m sure she misses you.”

“And home?”

I shrugged. “Maybe.”

“I miss home.”

To this day, I wonder sometimes if he still misses the way things once were. Us as neighbors and best friends, with our separate parents happy and hosting neighborhood grill-outs together. With our separate rooms and families. With our separate lives. But as
he sits beside me at our family gatherings in the house we grew up in with his wife and two children beside him, and mine beside me, I know he’s happy. Sure, things could’ve been better at times, but all in all, I think everything turned out okay.

Sitting beside each other on that bed twenty years ago, I had put my hand on his shoulder and pulled him closer. “You are home, brother.”