

5-2019

# These places we walk : stories of mental illness in American society.

Rachel Grace Trimble  
*University of Louisville*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ir.library.louisville.edu/honors>

 Part of the [Creative Writing Commons](#), [English Language and Literature Commons](#), and the [Mental and Social Health Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

Trimble, Rachel Grace, "These places we walk : stories of mental illness in American society." (2019). *College of Arts & Sciences Senior Honors Theses*. Paper 183.

Retrieved from <https://ir.library.louisville.edu/honors/183>

This Senior Honors Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the College of Arts & Sciences at ThinkIR: The University of Louisville's Institutional Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in College of Arts & Sciences Senior Honors Theses by an authorized administrator of ThinkIR: The University of Louisville's Institutional Repository. This title appears here courtesy of the author, who has retained all other copyrights. For more information, please contact [thinkir@louisville.edu](mailto:thinkir@louisville.edu).

Running head: THESE PLACES WE WALK

These Places We Walk: Stories of Mental Illness in American Society

Rachel Grace Trimble

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for  
graduation *summa cum laude* and  
completion of the Honors Scholar program

University of Louisville

May 2019

**Table of Contents**

**PART I: RESEARCH AND BACKGROUND**

Introduction.....3

Mental Illness Research..... 6

    Depression..... 10

    Bipolar Disorder..... 11

    Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder..... 13

    Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder..... 14

    Schizophrenia..... 15

Creation of My Stories..... 17

    When It Was Raining..... 18

    Casualties at Sea..... 19

    Handle Me Softly..... 20

    Find My Way Back Home..... 22

    Within My Chaos.....23

    Closing Thoughts.....24

**PART II: THE STORIES**

These Places We Walk: A Collection.....26

    When It Was Raining.....27

    Casualties at Sea.....44

    Handle Me Softly.....58

    Find My Way Back Home.....70

    Within My Chaos.....83

References.....98

## **Part I: RESEARCH AND BACKGROUND**

### Introduction

I first became fascinated with linked collections of short stories last spring when one of my professors assigned my Creative Writing class to read “The Things They Carried” by Tim O’Brien. It was one of my favorite short stories to date. I loved the concept and the language O’Brien used to craft a story built on such tiny details. At first glance, it seemed like such a narrow scope, just a story describing items in soldiers’ bags. It wasn’t until I finished the story and looked deeper that I realized how O’Brien wove all of those little details to create such vivid pictures of his characters. It was the kind of story that stuck with me after I read it. However, the thing that made the experience stand out to me was when my professor mentioned that “The Things They Carried” was actually the first story of a linked collection by the same name. All the stories published with it were about the same soldiers set in the Vietnam War. As soon as I heard that, I decided that I needed to read that collection and try to figure out how that could work stylistically. I was fascinated by the idea that a story could stand on its own so beautifully and also fit into a bigger story told by the whole collection. I wanted to know where one story ended and the other began and how the author balanced writing completed stories but also connecting them to the bigger picture of his whole collection.

After that, I found *The Things They Carried* at the library and I started reading linked collections of stories. Having worked on both novels and short stories in the past, the hybrid medium was especially fascinating to me. The careful construction of each little story and the way they all fit into each other like a puzzle intrigued me. Over the summer, I read around 12 collections of linked short stories in preparation for this project, five of which I chose to focus on during the writing of my own stories.

Reading through linked collections made me realize that linked short stories approach the idea of plot differently than novels do. In most novels, plot progresses along a linear timeline. The author has some freedom to manipulate that timeline by using flashbacks and jumping around in time within the novel, but the plot as a whole is largely sequential. In linked short stories plot is often linear *within* each story, but the story told by the collection as a whole rarely progress in any straightforward, direct fashion. Each story takes its place in the collection's master storyline like a photo finds its place in a collage. Time and perspective can seem almost random until the reader steps back to see how the stories interact with each other within the frame of the collection. There are many things that the stories could have in common, pieces that "link" them to each other. Some stories use recurring characters or places or even objects as a bridge between storie. Often, it is unclear at first why an author made the stylistic choices he did. However, much like the photo collage illustration, when one steps back, the whole effect of the art helps viewers to understand the subject infinitely better than a single image or a single story ever could.

For this reason, linked collections often are used to talk about the culture of a specific place (as in *Winesburg, Ohio*), time in history (as in *Tsar of Love and Techno*) or group of people (as in *Miles from Nowhere*). The unique properties of linked collections allow them to explore a theme from a variety of angles that is especially suited to this period piece or in-depth exploration of a setting. To me, this is one of their most interesting phenomena. For instance, in her collection, *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, Jennifer Egan tells the story of a group of kids and their rock band and then traces their lives into the present time. Each story takes on a different angle and perspective, often jumping around in time, but when everything is put together, Egan does a lot more than just tell a story about a few kids' tragic lives. She weaves together a

gloriously poignant and colorful picture of American punk-rock culture during the transition between the 70s and 80s. The culture itself comes alive. This culture survives within the characters as they try to move on, intertwining itself with the life of each character in a way that could not be explained in a linear fashion. This ability to create an image using several full and vibrant smaller images is the unique property of linked short stories that makes them so powerful.

For my thesis project, I decided to write my own collection of five linked short stories, focusing on the theme of mental health and mental health awareness. In writing these stories, I draw on my research reading collections of linked stories as well as research on mental health and mental disorders.

### **Mental Health Research**

There is a large body of recent psychology research on mental health literacy, which is defined as the public knowledge of different mental disorders and how to recognize, treat, and/or prevent them. (Jorm et al., 1997, p. 182). Poor mental health literacy is a crucial problem in western culture that can lead to stigma and/or misconceptions about the reality of mental illness. Poor mental health literacy also lowers the likelihood that people will seek treatment for their mental illness and know how to pursue better mental health (Jorm, 2012). However, before the conversation about treatment and stigma can properly begin, the public needs to be able to recognize mental disorders and sift through the multitude of common misconceptions and myths about people with mental illnesses.

Many learn information about the world comes from media, and their knowledge of mental illness is no exception. People are regularly exposed to film, book, and TV show representations of mental illnesses. Unfortunately, these are often inaccurate and sensationalized

to make a story that sells, ultimately contributing to the lack of mental health literacy in our society. In part, this phenomenon is caused by the lack of trained psychologists writing fiction. Oftentimes, when the people educated in psychology and mental health write, they write textbooks and scientific journals and peer-reviewed articles. Although research is important to the building blocks of psychology, fiction plays an important part in developing the narrative of mental illness in society. Stories can reach the people that would never read a psychology textbook and informative and accurate storytelling can have the power to help shift the stigma and misinformation surrounding mental illness.

The medium of linked short stories is especially suited for this task because of its ability to capture the heart of a problem from so many angles, bringing to life the subject of the collection as if that subject was a character in and of itself. Since this has been used in the past to write time period pieces and collections deeply rooted in setting and place, I believe these same principles can be applied to capture the heart of the human struggle with mental illness in our modern society.

One of the ways that linked collections do this best is by examining the same issues from more perspectives than a traditional novel would. Linked short stories allow for a natural shift in perspectives as authors can transition between stories to a new narrator, topic, or time. The sense of closure at the end of each story keeps this from being a jarring transition while still allowing for greater movement within the work itself. This is particularly valuable for an exploration of mental illness because it allows for individual stories to focus on unique mental illnesses, while still tying them together within one narrative.

As I began writing my stories, my goal for my portrayal of mental illness was to capture the heart of the characters' experiences while keeping their stories realistic and accurate

representations of mental illness. Accuracy was my first goal because I wanted to steer clear of the over-dramatized, inaccurate picture of mental illness that is often found in fiction. I read memoirs and articles on each disorder that appears in my stories, and I used criteria directly from the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5) as I drafted each story. Oftentimes, I only had 12-15 pages to devote to each character and his/her story, so much could be argued to happen “offscreen.” This would mean that some criteria for mental illness are visible and others are assumed to have happened at a later or earlier point. The problem with this logic is that readers who have not been educated in psychopathology cannot be expected to make these connections on their own and read between the lines. This partial representation of symptoms can lead to distorted views of mental illness even if the creator has no ill will or intention of doing so. For this reason, I chose to approach each story as if a psychologist would only have access to the symptoms shown in the story itself. To eliminate confusion, my goal was to write each story clearly enough that anyone with DSM-5 criteria could accurately diagnose any of my characters.

Secondly, I strove to make each representation of mental illness as realistic as possible. Oftentimes, characters in movies or books with a mental disorder might have “accurate” symptoms of the disorder, but the symptoms shown are such a rare or extreme case of the mental illness that people begin to have a warped perspective of what that illness would look like in real life. A good example of this is Autism Spectrum Disorder. Many people believe that those with autism are immensely talented in one specific area or have a sort of “gift.” This belief was popularized by films such as *Rain Man*, which often feature a gifted autistic character. An individual with this incredible ability in one specific arena is called a “savant.” In reality, this is one very specific and not too common aspect of Autism Spectrum Disorder. Only 1 in 10 people

with autism are savants (Treffert, 2013). However, due to the popularity of films like *Rain Man*, people often associate autism with savantism. In the same way, mental illnesses can be depicted in a way that is textbook accurate without being a realistic representation of that disorder and the way it affects a person's life. In my stories, my goal was to not only represent each mental illness accurately but also as realistically as possible so that readers will actually be able to come away having learned something about what daily life is like for someone with a mental illness.

The final goal I had for my stories was to capture the heart of people struggling with mental illnesses. Oftentimes, educational, accurate psychological information takes on a distanced, clinical perspective. I do want to provide people with factual information, but I also believe that it is important to dive into the thoughts, emotions, and motivation associated with mental illness and invite people to sympathize with the characters. My stories attempt to tackle some difficult questions, some of which are answered and some of which are not. I intentionally did not want to shy away from challenging conversations often associated with mental illness. I believe that stories can illuminate people's experiences in a way that statistics and scientific journals never really could. For instance, I could tell you that suicide is the 10th leading cause of death in America and, in 2017, 47,173 people died from suicide ("Suicide Statistics," 2017) or I could write about a suicide and its aftermath and let you meet characters with names and feelings. Stories explore the experience of connecting faces and names to statistics, and the way that stories bring science to life opens doors for the understanding of mental illness in a way that other, more scientific, forms of writing never could open as effectively.

In order to achieve these goals, I researched each mental illness that appears in my stories before and during the writing process. To research these disorders, I used direct DSM-5 criteria, articles, textbooks, and memoirs written directly by people with the mental illness I was

interested in studying. For the purpose of this project, I chose five disorders to focus on: depression, bipolar disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder, obsessive-compulsive disorder, and schizophrenia.

### **Depression**

The most common diagnosis for depression is Major Depressive Disorder (MDD). According to the DSM-5, to be diagnosed with MDD, a person must have either a “depressed mood most of the day, nearly every day” or a “markedly diminished interest or pleasure in all, or almost all, activities most of the day, nearly every day” during a two week period. In addition, they must have at least four of the following symptoms, also present for the same two week period. (1) Significant weight loss when not dieting or weight gain or decrease or increase in appetite nearly every day. (2) A slowing down of thought and a reduction of physical movement (observable by others, not merely subjective feelings of restlessness or being slowed down). (3) Fatigue or loss of energy nearly every day. (4) Feelings of worthlessness or excessive or inappropriate guilt nearly every day. (5). Diminished ability to think or concentrate, or indecisiveness, nearly every day. (6) Recurrent thoughts of death, recurrent suicidal ideation without a specific plan, or a suicide attempt or a specific plan for committing suicide (American Psychiatric Association, 2013).”

Depression is the leading cause of disability in the United States among people ages 15-44, affecting over 16 million adults in America (“Anxiety and Depression Facts & Statistics,” 2018). Depression is caused by the interaction of a wide variety of genetic, social, and cognitive factors. While genetic tendencies toward depression are passed down within families, a person’s biology interacts with his emotions, thoughts, and social environment to predict whether or not he will develop depression.

Treatment for depression usually involves medication and/or psychological therapy. There are three main types of antidepressant medications: tricyclics, selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors, and atypical depressants. Each of these antidepressants affects neurotransmitters in different ways, and some work better for certain people than others do. Oftentimes, psychiatrists will change dosages and medications a few times before finding the best match for a client. Antidepressants are often used in conjunction with a psychological therapy such as behavioral activation therapy or cognitive behavioral therapy (Sue et al., 2016, p.250-254).

While researching depression, I also read *This Close to Happy* by Daphne Merkin. The memoir recounts her struggles with depression in daily life. Merkin begins her memoir saying she feels like often people write about depression in a way that “bracket(s) the episodes of breakdown or incapacitating depression within unimpeachable demonstrations of the writer’s otherwise hyperfunctioning existence (p.7).” Merkin tries to step away from this approach and write about her 40+ year struggle with depression in a way that focuses on her daily life. She recounts how depression makes the simplest of tasks incredibly difficult and energy-depleting and how deeply it affects her ability to relate to people and engage in relationships. The diagnosis of “chronic depression” is easily enough comprehended, but it is not deeply understood until there is a face to the words, and Merkin offers herself as that face, showing readers what it looks like to fight through the fluctuations of an illness that doesn't seem to ever leave her alone.

### **Bipolar Disorder**

Bipolar disorders are characterized by individuals alternating between depressive episodes and manic or hypomanic episodes. According to the DSM-5, “hypomanic and manic episodes involve a specific period in which there is a definite, observable change in behavior occurring most of the day, nearly every day during the episode. The behavioral change involves

a consistently elevated, expansive, or irritable mood, and unusual increases in energy or goal directed activity.” In addition to this, the person experiences symptoms such as decreased need of sleep, racing thoughts, impulsivity, and exaggerated self esteem or feelings of grandiosity (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). These shifts in mood create mark impairment to people's ability to carry out daily tasks. Of all mood disorders, bipolar most frequently causes severe impairment (Kessler et al., 2005). 4.4% of American adults will experience bipolar disorder at some point in their lives (“Bipolar Disorder,” 2017). Bipolar disorder also has a strong genetic component, making it more likely for bipolar to run in families and also linking it to schizophrenia (Sue et al., 2016, p.255).

Individuals with bipolar disorder typically take mood stabilizing medications such as lithium, but medications for bipolar disorder can be complicated. Often, individuals end up taking a combination of mood stabilizers, antipsychotics, and sometimes antidepressants (Sue et al., 2016, p.262). These medications have had good success rates, but there is often difficulty getting people with bipolar disorder to commit to taking their medication regularly. Alongside medication, individuals with bipolar disorder often participate in interpersonal therapy or cognitive behavioral therapy (p.263).

In studying bipolar disorder, I read the classic memoir *An Unquiet Mind* by Kay Redfield Jamison. Jamison examines her history of bipolar disorder and its development through her teens and twenties. She also dives into her family history of bipolar disorder and her personal struggle with taking lithium. When revealing her illness to people, Jamison recounts the mixed reactions, including many cruel and judgmental comments made by classmates and colleagues. Jamison uses her personal experiences to inspire her work with mood disorders, and by the end of the book, she has earned her doctorate and is teaching psychology classes at UCLA. *An Unquiet*

*Mind* was a groundbreaking book when it was released in 1995, crashing through a lot of cultural stigma surrounding mental illness, and paving the way for many more memoirs about mental disorders to be published.

### **Post- Traumatic Stress Disorder**

Post- traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is a condition in which a person has extreme difficulty recovering from a traumatic event, leading to anxiety and intrusive symptoms. According to the DSM-5, for a PTSD diagnosis, an individual must have direct or indirect (experiencing or witnessing) exposure to a traumatic stressor involving actual or threatened death, severe injury or sexual violence. They must also experience intrusive symptoms (such as flashbacks or nightmares of the traumatic event), avoidant symptoms (such as attempting to avoid memories or external stimuli related to the event), and negative alterations in their mood (negative affect, decreased interest in activities, heightened arousal, exaggerated blame of self or others for the event, etc). The symptoms must be present at least a month following exposure to the traumatic event. 8% of American women develop PTSD while 2.3% of American men develop PTSD (“Post- Traumatic Stress Disorder,” 2017). Common exposures to traumatic events that can lead to PTSD include unexpected death of a loved one, sexual assault, being in combat, and being in a life-threatening accident (Sue et al., 2016, p. 172).

Occasionally, patients with PTSD are prescribed antidepressants or other medications, but more often, psychotherapies such as prolonged exposure therapy or cognitive behavioral therapy are used to treat PTSD. Prolonged exposure therapy involves exposure to trauma related cues, whether imaginary or in real life. Clients are asked to focus on their thoughts and emotions related to the traumatic event and process through the anxiety associated with the memories (Foa et al., 2013). In cognitive-behavioral therapy, psychologists “focus on helping clients identify

and challenge dysfunctional cognitions about the traumatic event and current beliefs about themselves and others (Sue et al., p. 178).” In other words, cognitive-behavioral therapists help clients to process their thoughts about the traumatic event and correct maladaptive thoughts that are triggering other PTSD symptoms.

### **Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder**

Obsessive- Compulsive Disorder (OCD) involves intense anxiety and excessive thoughts about a particular fear (obsessions) that lead to repetitive and ritualistic behaviors (compulsions) to reduce anxiety caused by the obsession. These obsessions and compulsions must be extremely time consuming and/or cause the individual significant impairment or distress (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Common obsessions include contamination, orderliness and symmetry, and unwanted impulses such as thoughts of harming self or others and intrusive thoughts of sexual acts (Sue et al., 2016, p.152). OCD affects 1% of the US population, 2.2 million people. The average age of onset is 19 years old, but one-third of adults with OCD first experienced symptoms in childhood (“Anxiety and Depression Facts & Statistics,” 2018).

Individuals with OCD are often prescribed serotonin-increasing antidepressants. However, only about 60% of OCD cases significantly respond to medication (Sue et al., 2016, p.159). Often, OCD is treated with a combination of exposure therapy and cognitive behavioral therapy. Exposure therapy involves educating individuals on the way OCD works in their brain and then exposing them to anxiety-inducing situations with prevention of compulsive rituals. This is done in small steps as the client is able to overcome smaller anxieties and work their way toward larger ones (Simpson et al., 2013). Cognitive behavioral therapy is especially useful to help clients examine their own thoughts and learn to test the validity of their obsessions and

compulsions. This cognitive restructuring process has shown marked improvement with many cases of OCD (Sue et al., 2016).

While researching OCD, I read *Because We Are Bad: OCD and a Girl Lost in Thought* by Lily Bailey. In her memoir, Bailey recounts her OCD symptoms and their development since her childhood. Bailey's obsession centers around people thinking that she is a bad person and intrusive thoughts that she will be responsible for terrible things happening. She develops complex rituals and lists of tasks that she believes will keep these things from occurring. In her poetic writing style, Bailey tracks the progression of her disorder through high school and college, chronicling her suicide attempt and hospital stays, ultimately ending up in recovery. She shares her story to help fight stigma and misinformation, so that people will see a more complex view of OCD, and so that people with OCD will be inspired to tell their own stories.

### **Schizophrenia**

Schizophrenia is a thought disorder that causes people to interpret reality abnormally. To be diagnosed with schizophrenia, an individual must have experienced delusions (irrational, illogical beliefs), hallucinations (experiencing the perception of something not physically present), and/or disorganized speech. These symptoms can be accompanied by symptoms such as grossly disorganized behavior, diminished interest in previously enjoyed activities, disordered thinking, paranoia and/or catatonia (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Auditory hallucinations are common as well as delusions of grandeur (believing they are someone powerful or famous), delusions of thought withdrawal (believing someone or something is removing thoughts from their mind), and delusions of persecution (believing that others are plotting against them or are out to get them in some way) (Sue et al., 2016). Some sign of the

disorder must be present for at least 6 months, with at least one month containing active symptoms such as hallucinations or delusions. Less than 1% of the US population meet diagnostic criteria for schizophrenia. Schizophrenia symptoms tend to appear in the late teens or early twenties, occurring earlier for males than females (“Schizophrenia,” 2018).

Antipsychotic medications are used to reduce the intensity of schizophrenia symptoms. In general, antipsychotic medications fall into either first-generation antipsychotics or atypical antipsychotics. Both of these can have serious side effects, but atypical antipsychotics were developed to have fewer side effects than the first-generation antipsychotics. Many antipsychotic medications work by reducing a person's dopamine levels (Sue et al., 2016). Patients with schizophrenia often also meet with a cognitive-behavioral therapist. Cognitive-behavioral therapy for schizophrenia has been increasingly successful helping people with schizophrenia live normal lives (Hansen, Kingdon, & Turlington, 2006).

While researching schizophrenia, I read Sandra Allen’s *A Kind of Miraculous Paradise* which is written in part by Sandra and in part by her schizophrenic uncle, Bob. Allen translates a rambling autobiography given to her by Bob into a stunning memoir, switching between their two voices and telling Bob’s story of struggling with schizophrenia throughout his life. The book talks extensively about the social stigma of mental illness and the history of schizophrenia treatment and its evolution throughout the past decades. Allen presents a lot of research on schizophrenia, breaking down stereotypes and misinformation on the illness in between chapters written by Uncle Bob. This structure is informative to readers while allowing them to see first-hand into the reality of schizophrenic hallucinations and delusions and their impact on someone’s life.

### Creation of My Stories

Within the collection as a whole, I attempted to capture the heart and pain of young individuals struggling with mental health issues in America. The stories together attempt to give space for the characters to ask and struggle to answer the most difficult questions about life with mental illness: Is there hope for the future? What is the value of their experiences? Is there beauty that can be found in the midst of such great pain? How do we reckon with suicide and suffering and how can that reckoning become something more than wasted pain?

While I was reading collections of linked stories in preparation for this project, I found that the character driven stories, such as Anthony Marra's *Tsar of Love and Techno*, spoke the most to me and filled me with an urgency to continue reading. Becoming invested in the characters opened the door for me to consider Marra's themes of love and war and the conclusions drawn from them. In this fashion, I chose to link my collection by characters as well. Each of the five stories has recurring characters, though they switch between different years and different narrators. My hope is that readers will become attached to the lives and struggles of each of my characters, and that this will pull them into the themes within the stories.

While organizing my stories, I was inspired by Jennifer Egan's *A Visit From the Goon Squad*. In her collection, Egan describes the lives of her five main characters when they played punk-rock music together in 1970s San Francisco. The remainder of the stories track each character as they move away and pursue incredibly different lives. However, each story somehow comes back to the five of them shooting up and playing music in California. The collection spirals out from this central event, as if to show readers that, no matter how far the characters would run, they could never truly leave their past in the past. This design was extremely effective. *A Visit From the Goon Squad* is the kind of book that sticks with its readers

for years after reading. Structurally, I decided to organize my collection around the central event of Chloe's suicide. Though the actual scene is never shown "on screen," all of the stories link back to that day in some way, developing the profound and lasting effects of suicide and the interwoven nature of each character's struggles with mental illness.

### **When It Was Raining**

All collections of linked stories have a tension between making each story distinct and able to stand on its own and developing themes across the stories so they feel like part of something bigger. Every author comes to a different conclusion about how to handle this tension. In her collection *Blackbird House*, Alice Hoffman navigates this primarily with her use of extended metaphor and imagery. There are recurring images (such as the blackbird and the red shoes) that appear across the whole collection in different stories. However, her individual stories also have their own extended metaphors that hold them together and conclude them with a sense of finality. Often, the stories are named from these images ("The Pear Tree," "The Wedding of Snow and Ice," etc). This was my inspiration for the extended image of rain in "When It Was Raining." I introduced the image in the second scene when Alison dreams of Chloe's funeral, and the final line of the story echoes back to the rain theme. Using the title and the final line to bookmark the story with the same metaphor gives the story a feeling of finality and the sense that it could be removed from the collection and stand on its own.

Alison's Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder symptoms unfold throughout the story, focusing on her recurring nightmares of Chloe's death and burial and her fear of confronting thoughts or external stimuli (Eliza) that make her think of Chloe, specifically finding Chloe's body. Both Eliza and Chloe (in "Casualties at Sea") mention that Alison already had anxiety before Chloe's death. A previous anxiety disorder is a risk factor for developing PTSD when exposed to a

traumatic stressor (“Post- Traumatic Stress Disorder,” 2017). Alison ends up in the hospital after experiencing a panic attack, which can often cause heart-attack like feelings (Sue et al., 2016, p.144). Individuals with PTSD have a much higher chance of having panic attacks than the average person does (Cogle et al., 2010). Alison is seeing a psychologist for her anxiety, but she does not decide to open up about Chloe until the end of the story.

Eliza’s bipolar disorder progresses largely off screen. In “Casualties at Sea,” Chloe notes that Eliza was one of the only people who understood her depression, as depressive episodes are characteristic of bipolar disorder as well. In “When It Was Raining,” Eliza is shown in recovery. I wanted to give a picture of a character with mental illness after treatment, instead of starting treatment like a lot of the other characters. Bipolar disorder is often negatively stereotyped as someone just having extreme mood swings. I hoped to use Eliza’s character to show people more of the complexities of bipolar disorder. For this reason, I had Eliza explain her experience with bipolar to Alison when Alison is in the hospital at the end of “When It Was Raining.”

### **Casualties at Sea**

Nami Mun’s *Miles from Nowhere* is a stunning short story collection following Joon, a runaway Asian girl, and her life on the streets of New York. The book paints a vivid and sometimes uncomfortable image of rarely discussed topics such as homelessness, assault, drug addiction and recovery. While reading *Miles from Nowhere*, Mun’s use of dramatic foreshadowing stood out to me. Early on in the stories, she intentionally gives away very large plot points, such as Joon’s doomed relationship with a drug addict or the death of her close friend Knowledge. This stylistic choice entirely changes the way the book is read. Instead of reading to find out what happens, I found myself reading, knowing what will inevitably happen, and just wanting to understand the emotions and choices that lead to the characters’ downfall. As a result,

at the conclusion of *Miles from Nowhere*, Mun's characters were incredibly vibrant and complex on the page.

In a similar fashion, I chose to place "Casualties at Sea" after "When It Was Raining," telling readers, from the first page of Chloe's narration, that she will inevitably die. This knowledge makes it even more heartbreaking to watch her struggle through a suicide plan only to reject it at the last minute. The victory rings hollow in light of the events that will transpire a year later. I wanted to tell readers the ending ahead of time so they would stop reading in order to discover a sequence of events and instead read to understand Chloe's thoughts and emotions, to discover what is the kind of pain that will ultimately drive her to suicide.

Depression is a very internal condition. Many of the symptoms are observable, but the majority of what makes the disorder unique is confined to within an individual's head. This reality can make it difficult for someone who has never experienced depression to understand what it is like. For this reason, I chose to write Chloe's story in a less structured, more stream-of-consciousness form compared to "When It Was Raining." I broke up her sections of narration with her poetry in order to paint a better picture of the inside of her mind and let readers feel like they are seeing into her journal in a way. Jennifer Egan does a similar mixed medium concept with song lyrics in a few of her stories. I find that blending the forms creates a more powerful message, so I attempted to capture this feeling in the transitions between poetry and prose in "Casualties At Sea."

### **Handle Me Softly**

Collections of short stories often have room for experimental pieces where the author has more freedom to play around with time or point of view and try something that might not be as successful in a novel format. For instance, the second story in Marra's *The Tsar of Love and Techno*, "Granddaughters" is written entirely in first person plural form a group of narrators that

just address themselves as “we.” It comes out within the story that they are a group of friends who are the grandchildren of characters in the previous story. This story and experimental parts of other collections inspired me to write one of my stories from an unusual point of view. The result was “Handle Me Softly.” I was incredibly surprised by how effective this method was and how much I liked the final product. The use of the second person narrator allows the relationship between Evelyn and Marian to become the focal part of the story and Evelyn’s OCD a parallel plot line. Since Marian Weber is a psychologist, her narration paints a clearer picture of Evelyn’s OCD than Evelyn herself would most likely give. Often, OCD can be hard to study in children because they are unable to articulate the obsessions involved in their compulsive behavior, so a story narrated by a realistic twelve-year-old would probably be more difficult to follow (Riddle, 1998).

A positive correlation has been found between childhood trauma and the development of OCD symptoms (Matthews, Kaur, & Stein, 2008). Given this relationship and Evelyn’s history of abuse, she was at higher risk for developing OCD. Evelyn’s obsessive fears revolve around fear that she will do something to hurt someone else. In order to manage these anxiety-inducing obsessions, she creates rules and rituals for herself, such as staying four feet away from people, repeating mantras four times, always riding in the backseat of cars, and tapping her feet four times before doing something that causes her anxiety. I intentionally chose a more uncommon manifestation of OCD for the purpose of this story. In her memoir, *Because We Are Bad*, Lily Bailey recounts doubting that she could have OCD because it didn’t match with the way the media talked about OCD. Often, OCD is depicted as causing someone to be very neat or concerned with germs. This can be the case, but that is a very limited perspective of the way

OCD works in a person's brain, so I chose to give Evelyn a different set of symptoms to broaden readers' perspectives of what OCD actually entails.

### **Find My Way Back Home**

Due to the genetic link between bipolar disorder and schizophrenia, I chose to make it Eliza's son who develops schizophrenia since Aaron would have been at higher risk. Stressful life events often are the triggers for people predisposed to schizophrenia to develop schizophrenic symptoms ("Causes of Schizophrenia," 2016). For this reason, Aaron starts having delusions and hallucinations when he is under immense stress trying to decide where to attend college and feeling the weight of his family's expectations.

My main goal in "Find My Way Back Home" was to capture the distortion of reality experienced by people with schizophrenia. Since I do not reveal Aaron's diagnosis until the end of the story, readers are forced to try and decide for themselves which parts of the narration are reality and which are part of a delusion or hallucination. This seamless warping of reality is one of the most difficult parts about schizophrenia. Patients often struggle to believe that their delusions or hallucinations are not real because they seem so logical and realistic.

Aaron's story also features one of the most ambiguous endings of the stories in my collections. The purpose of alluding to his slipping further into the delusions was not to necessarily imply that Aaron never recovers. In fact, I like to think that he completes treatment and is able to function in society like an average person. However, the purpose of the ending of "Find My Way Back Home" is to show readers how difficult it is for schizophrenic individuals to break out of their delusions. Often, new information just becomes integrated into the delusionary structure that already exists and it takes a lot of effort and treatment to start to break

through those dysfunctional thoughts and help individuals to start questioning their own thinking.

### **Within My Chaos**

At the end of *The Tsar of Love and Techno*, Anthony Marra writes a story called “A Temporary Exhibition” where he weaves together the threads and characters of the past stories in the collection. Unanswered questions from the past 200 pages finally meet up and are addressed. “Within My Chaos” was my attempt to create a similar effect, weaving together the storyline that has been progressing throughout the four previous stories and to finally address some of the questions about both plot and theme that have been between the lines for the duration of the other stories.

The major characters in “Within My Chaos” are all recurring, making it the only story that does not introduce new major characters. Keeping the pattern, however, it does have a new narrator. Evelyn’s narration provides a more full picture of OCD between “Within My Chaos” and “Handle Me Softly.” This was the only disorder I had the opportunity to present from the perspective of both the individual with the disorder and a mental health professional who is familiar with how the disorder works. I think that the result was very effective, providing a more diverse understanding of the same phenomenon by utilizing what linked short stories do best: changing perspective. I also chose to set “Within My Chaos” through the eyes of Evelyn because I think it’s important to talk about chronic mental illness that follows a person through their lifetime. 25% - 35% of people diagnosed with a mental illness battle that disorder for the rest of their lives (Kessler et al., 2007). Seven years after “Love Me One More Time,” Evelyn is an adult, trying to survive on her own in the world and feeling as though she is failing when an OCD relapse sets her back. The reality of mental illness is that it can be a bumpy, up and down

ride. A single fifteen page story can end on a positive note and that can seem like the end, but it's not. People's lives continue in the white space between stories, and "Within My Chaos" attempts to address parts of Evelyn's sometimes frustrating and chaotic journey toward healing.

### **Closing Thoughts**

Overall, this project was much more difficult than I expected it to be. With each story depending on the one before, even the smallest changes resulted in a lot of work to edit multiple stories. However, after many drafts and alterations, I am happy with the result. I think my stories captured a tone and message that could not have been done in a single 75-page narrative, and that is what writing linked stories is all about.

In the future, I would love to add more stories to the collection of five I wrote for this project. I think it could be expanded to a full-size collection with a few additional stories filling in some gaps. I would also be interested in expanding the mental disorders depicted to also include personality disorders. Personality disorders are often misunderstood by the public and easily confused with other mental illnesses. In the drafting of this project, I decided to keep my target narrower, since these were relatively short pieces and I think I would need more space and time to do personality disorders justice.

This project ultimately illustrates the importance of pairing scientific research with creative storytelling. Research and a strong theoretical background is essential to develop realistic and accurate stories that contribute to the public's knowledge and understanding of the world. However, creative storytelling brings the subject to life in a way that scientific writing cannot do on its own. Historically, there has been a divide between scientific study and creative expression. Oftentimes, people assume that these are opposites, that students are either "scientific" or "artistic," but for the full experience of understanding, we need to look at subjects

through both of these lenses. Like linked short stories, this is a discussion of perspective.

Scientific literature and creative writing are two different perspectives that can examine the same topic from different angles.

The last few years in higher education have seen a rise in the value placed on interdisciplinary education (Newell, 2010). More researchers and professors are recognizing the importance of teaching students to be proficient in both creative and scientific thinking. There has also been a rise in interdisciplinary classes where multiple subjects and perspectives are combined to look at a topic in different ways (Lai et al., 2017). I am excited to see how these topics in education develop and expand in the next few years. Encouraging students to produce more creative works with a scientific foundation will not only expand their personal horizons in the academic field but it will also help to correct many of the misinformation problems in the public, including the lack of mental health literacy.

**PART II: THE STORIES**

**These Places We Walk: A Collection**

## When It Was Raining

Fall 2018

My toes step from the warm sauna of my shower onto the icy tile floor and I flinch. Cold air hisses into the half open shower doorway and assaults my naked body. I grab for the towel hanging to my left and wrap it tightly around me as I take a few quick steps to the rug, leaving a trail of water droplets across the floor behind me. I know I should place the rug directly in front of the shower. Peter tells me this every time he visits and every time I explain that, while that might be functional, it would no longer be properly centered on the bathroom floor. “I’m the one who would have to look at that slightly off center rug all day. Not you!”

The doorbell rings. *Dang it.* Who would be here this late? I toss the towel in the hamper and tug on my t-shirt and pajama shorts. The cotton fabric sticks to my still-damp skin. I look back into the mirror and run my fingers through my hair. I don’t have time to do much else. Could it be one of the neighbors? Did I forget I invited Peter over?

When I reach the door, my fingers clumsily stumble over the locks. Why is it that rushing tends to make me do things more slowly? I pull the heavy wooden door open.

“Hello?”

My heart stops. It’s been six years but I would recognize that flaming ginger hair anywhere.

“Eliza?” The word feels ripped out of my throat. It hangs there in between us, taunting us, daring us to speak. Eliza, of course, talks first.

“Allie? Look, I know I should have called first, but I couldn’t find your number. I need a place to stay. Just for a few weeks? I’ve looked everywhere this time.”

“I...” I don’t know what to say. I don’t understand how I went from taking my average Sunday night shower to standing in my doorway facing the girl who used to be my best friend. “I haven’t seen you since...”

She nods and the pain still burns in her eyes. *Since the funeral.* The words go unsaid. I need to say something. I need to answer her, but the words aren’t coming out of my mouth. Breathe. Focus. I blink. I focus on the gusts of wind that rush against my legs. I breathe. I hate the way the night air smells like rain.

“Come inside.” I simultaneously want to run away and know every single one of her stories from the last six years.

She smiles. “Thank you.”

I don’t notice the tote until she hoists it off the ground and follows me in. Is that everything she owns?

“Have a seat.” I gesture to the tall black chairs around my island counter. Numbly, I put the kettle on the stove.

Eliza takes off her jacket and pulls her tiny frame up into one of the chairs, clutching the coat in her pale hands. “Your apartment is beautiful,” she offers.

“Thank you.” I feel detached from the words coming out of my mouth, as if they are not my own words, but are a script written for me. “It probably wouldn’t look too good if I say I can design other people’s houses but my own place is a wreck.” I pause. “Um... I’m going to go change. I’ll be right back.”

I stumble back down the hallway and into my bedroom. I close the door and sink slowly down with my back against it. Eliza’s back. Eliza. This is not a dream. Last I heard she was still in treatment for bipolar disorder. I was always so afraid I’d lose her to that. *Like we lost Chloe.* I

take a deep breath and press my hands into the plush carpet. The soft sensation calms my nerves a little bit. I don't know how I am supposed to feel. Eliza, Chloe, and I used to spend every day together. Our little misunderstood trio, fully convinced that the rest of the world could burn and we would be okay if we just had each other. There was a time when seeing those fiery curls in my doorway was the most reliable thing in my crazy life. But that was a long time ago. I take another deep breath. I can't just hide in here and leave her out there. Slowly, I stand. I replace my pajamas with a pair of sweat pants and a t-shirt from a local 5K race. From the other room, I hear the kettle start whistling.

I reopen my door walk back down the hallway very slowly. She is sitting just where I left her, looking around curiously, but there is no evidence that she moved even an inch while I was gone. I pause in the doorway for a moment. It's eerie having her sitting here alone without a pale blonde girl next to her. I feel like there's a ghost here, like that empty chair beside her was ready to hold someone who never showed. Swallowing, I turn off the kettle and methodically get two mugs down from the cabinet above it.

"Do you run now?" Eliza asks from behind me.

I turn back, my brain suddenly too small to process both the concept of making tea and the idea of running.

"Your shirt," she prompted, dark eyebrows raised.

"Oh um... yes. I run some. It's... good exercise." *And your psychologist told you it would help with the panic attacks.* "What kind of tea would you like?"

"Do you have any mint?"

"Yeah." I put a spearmint bag in one of the cups. I don't ask her which of my five mint variations she wants. "Can I get you anything to eat?"

“Don’t worry about it. I’m not hungry.”

My stomach turns over. “Um... okay.” I don’t say anything else, but when I turn back to look at her, I examine her carefully. Sometimes, when Eliza was in a manic phase, she’d forget about food entirely. *But she seems okay right now.* Eliza’s big blue eyes blink back at me. *You’re okay again, right?* A tension headache wedges itself between my eyes.

A few minutes later, we’re sitting at the table facing each other, sipping from matching maroon mugs. “So...” I don’t know where to start. “How have you been?”

Eliza laughs. Her laugh is terribly beautiful in the silence. “It’s been a time or two. I’m making it.” She stares at the table. “Dad’s in jail again. His roommates kicked me out, of course.”

I watch her, wondering if she is going to tell me more or if I should ask something else. There’s only one question I want to ask her, but it sticks in my throat.

“Um...I’ll get a job.” Eliza looks up and meets my gaze. “As soon as I can. I’ll help with rent or electric or whatever while I’m here. I called all the shelters before I just showed up. Just so you know.”

There’s no chance that I can tell her no. Maybe this is a good idea. Maybe she’s actually better this time.

“I have a guest room.” The words slip out before I can truly consider them. I can’t decide if I was desperate or terrified to ask her to stay. “I kind of use it as a pseudo-studio thing, but I have a couch in there that pulls out into a bed.”

The tension leaks out of her slim shoulders and they slump forward. “I’ll keep it clean. I promise.”

\*\*\*\*\*

It's raining. The rain is running down my face in little streams, blending in with my tears and tracking trails of mascara down my face. They are lowering the casket into this massive opening in the ground and I don't understand how Chloe could be in that big black box.

My mom grabs my elbow gently. "We should go honey."

"Chloe..."

"I know."

She doesn't know. She doesn't. She can't possibly know. My hands clench into little fists. I'm screaming but there isn't any sound coming out of my mouth and suddenly she's back in my arms and I'm begging her to breathe and she won't ever breathe again.

"Alison, baby, we need to leave." My mom is tugging on my arm. Her grip tightens as I try to pull away.

"Let go of me!" I need to get to that casket. It occurs to me that this whole thing is a joke, that Chloe isn't actually dead. It was a trick. I can't fall for it. They're going to bury her under there and when she wakes up, she won't be able to get out. "I have to save her! Let go of me." Another set of hands grab at me and my feet sink deeper into the mud, but I lash out at them as hard as I can and run. I break free, tears streaming down my face, and launch myself over the edge of the hole that they dug for her. "Chloe..."

I don't want to stay here in a world that doesn't have Chloe. "Take me with you..." The darkness engulfs me, but Chloe is in the darkness. Suddenly I am back in her room, holding her broken body, shaking back and forth, screaming. Distantly, I know that there is sunlight coming through her lace curtains, but all I can see is darkness. There is blood on my hands. Chloe's blood. She's gone. She's gone. I was too late. She gave up. Someone save her. Breathe, Chloe. Please, breathe. I should be crying. I can't stop screaming.

I wake kicking back the sheets and gasping. The blankets tangle around my legs and I thrash back and forth. I must get out. I have to get to her. I can't be too late this time. She's dying. Chloe. Chloe, can you hear me? I struggle to breathe but sobs catch in my throat.

I open my eyes. Pale blue walls and soft white curtains. Warm vanilla smell from my ceramic wax warmer. Breathe. Black industrial lamp on my bedside table. Antique wind up alarm clock. 3:45 AM. Home. I am home in my bed and it is not raining.

Groaning, I untangle my legs from the covers and sit up. I pause there for a moment, perched on the edge of my bed, head in my hands. I can taste my sweat. I reach for the glass on my bedside table and drink a few sips of the now lukewarm water. Surely I've had this dream enough to not be scared anymore. It's been six years.

Exhausted, I collapse back into bed. I've been asleep for the last four and a half hours but I feel as if I haven't slept in days. I close my eyes carefully, suspicious of rain that could start falling at any minute. There is no rain. I drift off into a restless sleep.

\*\*\*\*\*

I am sitting in my office, drawing out some ideas for a client's French Country inspired kitchen when Peter calls. I am tempted to finish and call him back later, but we haven't seen each other in two weeks, so I pick up. I should take a break anyway.

"Hey Pete, what's up?"

"Well, nice to hear from you, stranger." He laughs. "You've been MIA for a while. Are you redesigning the White House?"

I turn my desk chair to face the floor-to-ceiling window to my left and kick my feet up on my stool. "Yes. That's actually what I'm in the middle of right now. The President would like to say hello."

I hear Peter's smile in his voice. "Put him on, then!"

I laugh. "Fine, fine. I give. It's just lonely old me. No president here. But really, Pete. How are you?"

A door closes on Peter's end. "But really, how are you doing, Al?"

"I'm okay. Not much out of the ordinary. Eliza's still staying with me and all. Um... I'm just at the office working. I went to the gym yesterday, had counseling, the usual."

"How was counseling?"

I frown and stare up at the wooden paneled ceiling. Why is he fixating on that? Peter knows I don't want to talk about the counseling. "Um...it was fine. Nothing unusual."

"Did you tell her about the nightmares yet?"

Anger sparks through me. "No, Peter. I didn't tell her about the nightmares. You know I only ever told you because I was drunk that night. Look, why are you grilling me about this?"

"Hey, hey Al, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to piss you off. I just think you should tell her, that's all. You shouldn't have to deal with that."

Sure I should. I killed my own best friend. A few nightmares are nowhere near what I deserve. "Yeah okay. I'll think about it."

"Good. I just care about you, okay?"

"I know."

He knows I want a subject change. "How's Eliza?"

"She's fine I think. She got a job waitressing at that café down the street from me." I don't tell him how little I've been home lately. I don't tell him that I can't look at her without seeing Chloe.

“That’s great!” There is a static sound in the background. I wonder if he just stepped outside into the wind.

“Yeah. I’m keeping an eye on her.” She’s not better though. She’s pretending to be happy for me so I’ll think everything is fine. She’s going through a depression episode again. She has to be. She tries to smile but her eyes are so sad. She’s always wearing long sleeves even when it’s warm inside just like...

No. Don’t think about it, Alison. You’re being irrational again. I focus on an out of place divot in the ceiling. Breathe. I take a deep breath. I count the ceiling panels carefully. Breathe.

“Al? You there?”

“What?”

“I asked if you were busy next Friday. Is everything okay?” Peter sounds concerned. A car honks in the distance.

“Yeah sorry. I just got distracted. Uh...Friday?” I look up at the calendar hanging upon my desktop. “The 18<sup>th</sup>?”

“Yeah. A week from tomorrow.”

“That should be fine, yeah.”

I hear the smile back in his voice. “Good. I’ll text you later and we can figure out details. Have a good day at work, Al.”

“Yeah, you too. Talk later.”

\*\*\*\*\*

Eliza chops vegetables for dinner and I sit at the kitchen table, responding to emails and pretending not to watch her.

“Should we add broccoli?” She looks up at me with those soft green eyes and, for just a second, Chloe is looking at me over her mom’s kitchen counter while we recreate a new recipe from Pinterest. I blink. The smell of browning beef and onions fills the air.

“Um...sure. Broccoli is good.”

Eliza cocks her head. “Okay. You good?”

I hate the way she talks to me so naturally as if we have still been best friends for the last six years. “Yeah. I’m fine.”

She smiles. “Okay. What pan do you usually use for rice?”

“Cabinet to the left of the stove. It’s the medium white one.”

“Thanks!” Eliza stands on her tiptoes and reaches for the pan. Her green sweatshirt sleeve slips down a couple inches and exposes the white zig-zag scars. My stomach heaves and I look away quickly. I stare at my inbox, focusing on the individual letters, trying to breathe properly. Are there red marks further up her arms? Her legs? What do I do? I’m losing her.

Eliza puts the rice on the stove. “I’m going to run to the bathroom. I’ll be right back.”

She leaves and I just sit there, trying to force myself to stop thinking. My thoughts are a runaway train, squealing down the tracks. Stop. *Stop thinking, Alison.* Then I understand.

Bathroom. No no no. What is she doing in there? She’s taking too long. What’s wrong? Is she manic now? Is she depressed? The cuts. Oh god she saw me looking at them. She has a knife.

My whole body is shaking. I can’t miss the signs this time. I won’t lose them both. I won’t. I stand up and go to the bathroom door, unstable on my feet. My chest is compressing. Focus. I stand there, inches from the door, listening. What is she doing? Why is the sink still running? She’s trying to cover up the sound. I try the door, but it’s locked. My heart is trying to tear itself out of my chest. I have to get to her. They’re burying Chloe and she’s alive in that

stupid black box. It's just a joke. A stupid joke. I pull harder on the doorknob. I can't get it to open. Why won't it open?

From a far-off distance, I hear Eliza calling my name. Eliza? Eliza is going to kill herself, too. I don't know anything else so certainly. They're going to dig her a hole too. Why can't I stop her? Why can't I get this door open? Why can't I ever save them? I kick and I try to scream, but I can't get enough oxygen into my lungs. This can't be happening right now. Inhaler. Where is my inhaler? I can't...breathe. I have to get this door open. How could I have been so stupid?

The door opens from the inside. That doesn't make any sense. I don't understand. Eliza is beside me. We are on the ground but I don't remember sitting down or falling.

"Allie...Allie...Can you breathe? Allie, are you okay?" She's saying words, but it sounds like she's miles away and I don't know understand what she is asking. My mouth won't make words form. Eliza has her phone out now. She's calling someone. I don't understand why. My heart pounds in my ears. We sit there together on the cold tile floor in my hallway. I can't tell if Eliza is holding me or if I'm holding Chloe and I just can't make Chloe breathe.

She's never going to breathe again.

\*\*\*\*\*

The room smells sterile and alcoholic. I wrinkle up my nose. The IV machine to my right beeps rhythmically. I scroll absently through Instagram but I'm not really looking at what I see.

"Knock knock," Eliza whispers. She stands in the doorway to the hospital room and smiles, red hair splayed out behind her, unruly as always. She has a Starbucks cup in each hand.

I sit up a little taller and set my phone down on the side table. "Hey. You can come in."

She sits down on the end of the bed and hands me one of the cups. "Caramel latte. I hope you still like those...How are you?"

I smile and take a sip of the drink. "I'm fine. Just a panic attack. Everything is back to normal now. They should let me go home any minute." I pause and just look at her for a moment. "Thank you." I hate the way my voice sounds so comfortable with her, as if we've still been best friends for the last six years.

But I also love it.

"Um..." I swallow and try to make my voice brace. "I'm sorry for scaring you. I just...I don't know. I was thinking about...about Chloe." The word chokes me. I stare down at my long fingers curled around the cup in my lap. I try again. "I was thinking about Chole and your scars just..."

Eliza smiles kindly and pulls up her sleeves. She holds her arms out to me so I can see the ghostly white scars up and down her forearms. "It's okay. I'm okay now, Allie. I'm not ashamed of them." She takes another sip. "I finished the treatment in New York six months ago and the people there were amazing. I learned so much about bipolar and how it works. I used to want to die when I had the depression phases, but then the manic times would come and I'd feel like I could do anything. I didn't realize how destructive it all was." She reaches over and squeezes my hand. "But I'm really happy and healthy now. I'm taking mood stabilizers and practicing the exercises they taught me in counseling."

I nod and breathe a little more easily, trying to comprehend that she's okay. That I was wrong. "Do you still like...get depressed sometimes?"

Eliza smiles gently. "The mood stabilizers help the extreme cycles stay at a more manageable level. Sometimes I do feel it a little bit though, but I feel like I can actually handle it now."

I nod again, trying to focus on her words. Eliza is okay. Eliza is happy.

“Hey... I’m not her. I’m not Chloe.” She says gently.

“I just...” Staring down at the white sheets in my lap, I breathe carefully. “I guess I was projecting all my fear with Chloe onto you. I just... I didn’t want to make the same mistakes again. Like after all this time, I should be able to see the signs.”

Eliza nods in understanding but a furrow creases between her brow. “I don’t think we could have saved her,” she says quietly.

“Knock, knock.” I look up to see Peter standing in the doorway. He smiles wryly. “Hey, Al. Everything okay?”

I look around the hospital room, an unwilling smile tugging at the corner of my lips. “I mean...not exactly.”

Peter laughs and sits down opposite Eliza. “Fair enough.” He squeezes my knee. “I wish I knew it was this bad. I’m so sorry.”

My throat catches as I look back at their concerned faces. I try to force a smile, but their faces blur as I blink away the tears. “Thanks guys.”

\*\*\*\*\*

Two hours later, I am standing at the curb watching Peter pull up in his silver Civic. Eliza looks at the ground and awkwardly clears her throat. I raise my eyebrows and frown at her.

“Yes?”

“Um...” Eliza starts.

Peter steps out of his car, but leaves it running. “There’s um...somewhere we think you should see.”

On my right, Eliza takes a deep breath. “I think you should visit her. Chloe.”

My chest tightens. “You want me to go to the cemetery.”

Eliza meets my gaze, her eyes gentle. “Please? I think it will be good for you.”

The anger starts in my chest and flames to life down my spine. Chloe. Chloe laughing under Christmas lights. Chloe’s lifeless head in my lap. Chloe in a casket. “No! Hell no I’m not going back there.”

Peter locks eyes with me. “Allie...I will drive you home right now if that’s where you want to go. But you can’t run away forever. Just...think about it?”

I feel nauseous. I swore I would never go back to that place. Peter’s eyes look desperate. I can’t go back. Eliza reaches for my hand. “Just once,” she whispers. “I’ll never ask again.”

“Do you... go there often?”

She nods and I am struck by the image of the two of them without me. The roses grow up around Chloe’s grave and twist two of them together and I stand outside the garden, too afraid to come back inside. I fractured us apart. I don’t even know if there are roses at her grave.

Blinking back tears I look up at Eliza and Peter. Something tells me that if I don’t go with them right now, I’ll never set foot in that cemetery.

“Okay,” I whisper. “I’ll go.”

They both smile but do their best not to look too excited. Eliza gives me a hug. Wrapping my arms around her, I take a deep breath. Her warm vanilla perfume fills my nostrils. “It’s going to be okay,” she says softly. “We’ll be with you the whole time.”

When we get into his car, we listen to the radio in silence for a few minutes, just watching the interstate speed past under Peter’s tires. Eliza breaks the silence by telling us about slipping down half a flight of stairs at the mall yesterday. I almost forgot how good a storyteller she is. In a few minutes, we’re all laughing uncontrollably and then we just start talking. We talk about everything. Eliza and I tell Peter about our high school memories, about Halloween

costume traditions, about our hot gym teacher sophomore year, about spring break beach trips. We talk about Eliza's bartending days and eventually her year in treatment. We talk about graduation and how desperately I'd worked to get out of my house and move into the city for school as soon as I could. How ironic that, three years later, we are all together in this car, riding back to the town where everyone lost their mind.

Most of all, we talk about Chloe. I haven't talked about her in six years, but once we start, I don't ever want to stop. Eliza and I tell Peter about her adorably weird taste in clothes, her bleeding heart for any and all animals, and that one time when she accidentally baked Eliza's birthday cake with salt instead of sugar. I tell Eliza about my dreams. Catching my eyes in the rearview mirror, Peter smiles.

Eliza looks over at me. "I know," she says softly.

"What?"

"About the dreams. You still talk in your sleep. I..." She trails off.

"Go on," I say. I am surprised that I don't feel as though my privacy was violated. If anyone has to hear those, it should be Eliza.

"Well have you seen anyone about it? Like a therapist? It sounds like PTSD."

"PTSD? Like what veterans have?" Peter is watching me in the rearview mirror, clearly glad someone else also thinks I should talk to my counselor about this.

Eliza frowns. She seems uncharacteristically worried. "Well it's not just veterans. I was a psychology major for the one year I was in college, so I'm not an expert or anything, but it has to do with a traumatic event and I mean...you were the one who found her."

I stare into my lap and the image of Chloe's broken body flashes into my mind. "I mean...yeah." Maybe I should research that. Maybe I could actually tell my therapist. Maybe this is really a thing that happens to people and I'm not just crazy.

"It's just a thought. I mean you already had anxiety and it could have like...took another turn after she died."

The car stops. I look up to see the gray arch above the cemetery entrance, glowing gold around the edges in the fading daylight. My hands are shaking. Peter turns and looks over his seat. His eyes are filled with sympathy and strength, but I can't meet his gaze. I don't want anyone to see me like this.

I start crying. I'm not even sure why I'm crying, but I slowly open the car door and step out into the sunlight. I hear the slam of Eliza's door close on the other side of the car, followed by the sound of Peter's door.

Eliza catches up with me first. "I can show you where-"

I cut her off. "I know where she is."

My feet haven't stood on this ground in six years, but I've been here hundreds of times since then. I wind my way through the graves numbly. The smell of freshly cut grass fills my nostrils and the sun bakes my hair as it hangs on the horizon. It's unusually warm for October. I hear two sets of footsteps trailing behind me. In my mind, I pictured the two of them close to me, leading me gently through the gravestones, but now that I am here, I just want to see her for myself.

The grave is suddenly before me. In my mind, this is still a fresh grave, but the gaping hole in the earth has been filled as if it were never there. Grass grows seamlessly over the abyss.

I realize that the only fresh grave is inside of me. A stone sits six feet above that black casket and her name dances across it in cursive letters. Chloe Anne Coleman. I sink to my knees.

Tears stream openly down my face, but I can breathe freely. Roses grow around the base of the headstone. Their comforting perfume fills my nose. Pink and yellow and white and red. A whole rainbow of roses. Chloe would have loved it.

“Alison?” Eliza whispers my name from a few feet behind me. Her voice is trembling. “It wasn’t your fault.”

The tears fall faster. I want to protest. I want to tell her that I did it all, that I knew she was cutting, that I didn’t think it was a big deal, that I didn’t make it to her house fast enough the day she died, but sitting here, smelling the sunlight and the roses, the monstrous dream that haunts me seems so far away.

“I...I didn’t kill you.” The words stumble their way out of my mouth as I stare at that beautiful name engraved in the smooth marble. “I didn’t kill you, Chloe.” I’m crying still, but the tears feel like freedom. I lay my forehead against the cold stone and I think about it all. I think about the moment she first sat down with me and Eliza in 7<sup>th</sup> grade and how we made our little rag-tag band. No one had ever understood our pain the way Chloe did. I think about her parents’ divorce and holding her body wracked with sobs. I think about whispering secrets at sleepovers and guessing all the boys she had a crush on. I think about picking her up after her study abroad and how her arms felt around me when she ran and tackle-hugged me in the airport. I think about the monster that slowly took her over and I let myself cry, not from shame, but from sorrow.

When I turn back, Eliza and Peter are standing there together, like my own little bodyguards. For the first time in as long as I can remember, I am not afraid to let them see me

fall apart. Peter smiles fondly at me. Without a single word, I know what he is saying. *Good job, Al. I'm proud of you.*

I look at Eliza, her red hair aflame in the golden hour of the slowly dying sun. She is crying too. Small silver streaks slip down her pale cheeks. Eliza survived the monster. I'm surviving the monster. As another warm breath rushes into my lungs, I know that this is not going to be an easy road. The pain doesn't just leave because you sit down at a graveyard. This isn't a movie. I'll still have to fight the monster tomorrow. I'm going to have to have a lot more therapy before I'm really okay again. The dream might come back. But in spite of all of this, I am smiling.

Eliza smiles back, hesitantly. "What?" She asks.

I breathe in. I breathe out. "It's not raining anymore."

**Casualties at Sea**  
**Fall 2011**

*I shrink from you  
hollow  
silhouette.  
I grow  
smaller by day and  
you will not see  
when I  
waste away.*

Dad is waiting for me when I step off of the jetway into the crowded airport. He looks uncomfortable surrounded by so many well-dressed people. Folding and unfolding his arms, he scans the swarm of people for my face. I pause for a moment, conflicting thoughts swirling around inside my brain. *I did it. I'm out of that cursed town and How do I talk to a dad I haven't seen in five years?*

“Hi dad.” *I guess that's how.*

He looks me up and down and smiles, eyes searching my face hesitantly. “You changed your hair.”

I laugh. “Yeah I guess I was still blonde the last time you saw me.” *And II.*

“Can I help you carry your stuff?”

“Sure.” I hand him my carry on and we head up the escalator to retrieve my checked bag. The floral bandana mom tied onto the handle makes it easy to spot. Dad makes careful conversation. How was your summer? Did you do anything fun with your friends? Are you looking forward to wintering somewhere warmer this year? He does not ask about mom. He does not ask

about the depression. He most definitely does not ask about the baby who will soon be pushing out against my stomach.

Fifteen minutes later, we are sitting in dad's Impala pulling onto the highway. Dad turns up the music, "because I know you like to listen to music," but I know it's really because he doesn't know how to talk to me any more than I know how to talk to him. Dad assumes I listen to pop because I'm a teenage girl. Watching San Francisco rush past my window, I try to remember what music I listened to when I was eleven. WILD 94.9 plays "Someone Like You" immediately followed by "Rolling in the Deep." Adele's voice grates on my nerves. My fingers itch to reach into my backpack and grab my MP3 player and earbuds, but I don't want to be offensive. Franz Schubert will still be there when we get to his apartment. The GPS lady says the drive will take us 47 minutes, but with San Francisco traffic it's over an hour before we arrive.

Dad lives in a second-floor condo in Duboce Triangle. He opens the door and helps me carry my bags inside to the second bedroom.

"Alrighty, Chloe. Here you are." He gestures around to the room.

I like the tall windows and big hardwood desk. "It's nice."

The corners of his mouth relax. "Um... do you need help unpacking?"

"No, I'm okay. Thanks, though." I lift my suitcase onto the bed and unzip it. There is a mahogany dresser on the far side of my new room, and I begin carrying clothes from the suitcase to the drawers. Dad stands there awkwardly watching me for a couple minutes before excusing himself.

"Hey, I'm going to go order us some dinner, okay?"

"Sure, Dad. Thanks."

And then I am alone. I sink slowly down onto the soft bed, mind reeling. My phone vibrates on the bed beside me. I reach for it. New message in the group chat.

ELIZA: hey did u make it?

Only a second goes by before Alison chimes in.

ALLIE: I'm still so jealous. My mom would never let me do a study abroad

I smile weakly. I don't want to lie to them. Allie and Eliza have been with me through everything. They've understood me and listened to me when no one else did, but I soon as I say I'm in California and not Spain, I'm going to have to tell them what happened, and I can't do that. Some things are better left unsaid.

ME: Yes! Made it here safely. Thanks for asking. I'll keep you posted.

I let my phone fall back onto the bed and finish unpacking my clothes. I take the little yellow bottles out of my bag and my stomach heaves. I'm so sick of taking those useless pills. The brief respite they sometimes give me is just more false hope. Fingers shaking, I take today's pill and place it carefully in the far corner of my top drawer of my desk. Then I sit the bottles on my dresser carefully, so my dad will see them when he comes back.

Every muscle in my body aches, a combination of the plane ride and stress. Dad doesn't come back in for the next 45 minutes. I assume he will let me know when whatever food he ordered arrives. I change into sweatpants and sit in the big desk chair with my lavender bound journal. Gently, I open the journal to the first page and breathe deeply. The smooth white pages brim with potential and their familiarity is comforting. I let myself relax in this foreign city and I write.

My chest caves under the weight that no one  
can see.

I wonder how

to tell you that I am  
sinking  
slipping  
snaking  
beneath the surface.  
All is lost.

I am thirteen the first time I see a psychologist. My mom drags me to his office after she got tired of trying to make me get out of bed in the morning. The darkness has been creeping over my mind for months before she decides to intervene. I don't have a bad mom, but she is running for city council and she doesn't notice the thin red scabs that spread like a wildfire across my arms and thighs until I am firmly convinced that I am too far gone to be saved.

We see the therapist after school so that I don't have to explain an absence to Alison and Eliza. His office is on main street and both mom and I look around carefully before entering. Thankfully, there are no big windows looking into the waiting room. In a small town like this one, you have to be careful about those kinds of things.

"Are you nervous?" she asks once we are safely inside.

"No. I'm fine." The lie is so comfortable between my teeth I want to go to sleep cocooned within it.

The psychologist's office is painted shades of green and blue. Distantly, I know that these colors are meant to calm me. If my depression could be cured by a new coat of paint on my walls, I wouldn't be here.

"How has your day been, Chloe? It's nice to meet you." The psychologist is a clean shaved man in his 40s. He wears a suit. I think I've seen him in the grocery store.

"It's been fine." *I wanted to kill myself this morning.*

He smiles kindly. This man really does want to help me. “Tell me about yourself.”

“Um... I’m thirteen. I go to Westview Middle School. I want to be an author one day. My mom made me come here.” *Because I hate myself.*

“Okay, Chloe. What made you want to be an author?”

*This is a pointless waste of time.* “I’m here because I can’t stop cutting myself and nothing is fun anymore and I want to die. Can you fix that, or should I go home?” Tears sting my eyes.

Unfazed, this man nods gently. “Well I will certainly do my best.”

He asks me other questions like *when did this start?* and *what do you mean that nothing is fun anymore?* He asks if I’ve ever tried to kill myself. He wants to know what it’s like for me to wake up, to go to school, to be with friends, to be alone. He tells me that we will have counseling once a week and that I will start taking 50 mg of something called Zoloft each day and he says that those blue pills are going to help me.

I believe him. I believe that this nightmare is actually going to be over. I believe that this man and his little blue pills are going to save my life, that tomorrow things will change. I also believe him after my relapse and after my first hospital stay the same way that I believe the next psychologist when I switch to seeing her Thursdays at 4:00. Hope worms its way down into my fragile heart with every medication change and dosage change and therapist change no matter how hard I try to stop it. *This is it. It’s going to work this time.*

But it doesn’t. I have very good psychologists and very high dosages of the most expensive antidepressants, but I only ever get better for a few weeks at a time. Deep inside, past the stubborn and hopeful façade, I know that this is my fault. Something inside of me is irreversibly broken and all these people use their neurotransmitters and genetics and divorce stress to explain away a darkness that is written into the fabric of my soul.

I miss the feeling  
of wanting  
breath to fill my  
lungs. Each day  
I wake but I  
still wonder  
why?

Dad comes home from work on my second day in San Francisco with a stack of books. He drops them down on the kitchen table where I sit with my notebook covered in poetry fragments. I started writing to distract myself from the nausea that followed me around until lunch ( “morning sickness” as the internet calls it) and I haven’t moved since then.

“For school,” he says gruffly.

I nod. I am “homeschooled” this year, though I don’t really know what that means. Dad is gone until dinner time most days and I can’t imagine he’ll be teaching me much. Closing my journal, I slide the stack of books over to my side of the table. These books might be a weak gesture, but they are my parents’ way of trying to keep me from going to a new school as my stomach slowly expands with the life inside of me. Once again, I have caused some kind of problem they must solve to keep our lives running smoothly. I wonder how much easier mom’s career would be if I had never been born.

“Chloe?” I look up to see my dad looking at me with questions in his eyes.

“What? Sorry did you say something?”

“I just asked what you thought.” He looks nervous, as if “dad” is an old suit that he is worried will no longer fit his expanding life. “About the books.”

“Oh sorry.” I realize I’ve been staring at the books without processing anything I am seeing. *Algebra 2. 10<sup>th</sup> Grade American History. Anthology of British Literature Volumes 1 and 2.* “Looks like...school.” *What kind of response does he want?*

Dad nods. “Good.” He opens the refrigerator and pulls out a quart container of Dunkin Donuts iced coffee. “You want a glass?”

“Um...sure.”

He sets out two glasses from the cabinet beside the stove and pours them full before sitting down opposite me. “Here you go. So, um...”

I take the glass. “Yeah?”

“The uh... the baby. Your mom scheduled you some appointments with a doctor each month.” He hands me a business card belonging to Dr. Maria Eshwood, OBGYN.

“Okay.”

His eyebrows furrow like he expected more of a response from me. I’m pretty sure I’m supposed to be really emotional about all of this. Though I don’t know anyone else who was raped by one of their mom’s employees and then sent across the country to have a baby in secret, so I don’t really have much of a precedent on which to base my reactions. These events could ruin my life, but I struggle to care too much about that. My life was ruined a long time ago. I stand up and gather my new books.

“One more thing.”

“Uh huh?”

“A psychologist. Um...do you want one?”

My throat hardens, and I feel the anger drive away my tears. “No.”

He shifts in his seat. “Well...okay fine. But your mom updated your pharmacy to the CVS down the street, so you can at least get your medicine.”

“Okay. I’ll text her and tell her thank you.” *But you can’t make me take them.*

*Unborn*

Your fire

flickers

in my stomach and I

did not expect a secret

to keep me warm at night.

By late September, I no longer have my daily bouts of nausea, but my stomach begins to protrude. Embarrassed to confess my need for new clothes, I resort to only wearing sweatpants and my loosest shirts. As my stomach grows, so does the darkness in my mind. I spend long hours writing, only to rip the pages out of my journal and shred them to pieces. I don’t understand why the quality of my writing declines so quickly, but I feel helpless to stop it. My collection of pills grows in its drawer.

*Beep beep beep.* I shove my head under my pillow. What’s the point of waking up anyway? Every day looks the same. Hours lying in bed, trying to make myself do something productive, but struggling to remember what motivates people to accomplish anything at all. Dad keeps nagging at me to work on my “schoolwork.” Some mornings I pick up one of the books and struggle through three pages before collapsing back to my bed in exhaustion with no recollection of what I read. A few more hours writing and rewriting the same awful poem as I await my dad’s return from work, long empty days broken up by occasional doctor’s visits as my body rebels against me.

*Beep beep beep.* I should turn that alarm off. I struggle to motivate myself to roll over. What's the point of anything really? *Beep beep beep.* I mean, everyone is going to die eventually. Why are we all rushing around to do things as if any of it will last? I have discovered all there is to see in life. Death seems fascinating and dark and daunting. *Beep beep beep.*

"Chloe?" My dad calls my name from the other side of the door. "Chloe, are you okay? That thing has been going off for a long time?"

Huh? I roll over slowly, holding my enlarged stomach awkwardly. "Dad? Why aren't you at work?"

*Beep beep beep.* "It's Sunday, honey. Are you alright?"

*Turn it off, Chloe.* I fumble with the alarm for a few seconds before it's screeching stops. "Um...yeah sorry. I'm good." It's Sunday? I thought it was Monday...or Wednesday. I don't know. I blink, head spinning.

Dad's feet shuffle in the hall. "Okay well...if you want something to eat, let me know." He walks back toward the kitchen. My stomach heaves. I know I am supposed to eat, but I can't remember a time when I looked forward to the flavor of food. I can't summon the energy to walk to the kitchen, much less sit and chew all the food. It's Sunday. I don't have anywhere to be. People sleep in on Sundays. *Don't feel bad. You're just tired. It's okay.*

I sleep.

*Waning*

The wolves are  
howling. Time ~~slips away~~  
dances just  
out of my reach. Do you  
feel the pieces of me  
falling

into the night? I fear ~~life~~  
 my body  
 shrinking  
 as it expands.  
~~I am falling apart.~~ New  
 darkness is upon us and  
 I vanish within  
 myself.  
~~Goodbye.~~

I am sitting at my desk trying to convince myself to get on the bus and go to my doctor's appointment when my phone's vibration startles me. It's Alison. I answer.

"Hey, Chloe! It's been so long since I've heard your voice. How's Barcelona??"

"Um." I swallow and force a cheerful smile into my voice. "It's great. Very sunny!"

"Are you listening to music? It's really loud."

"Huh? Oh sorry!" I had forgotten that I was playing Felix Mendelssohn's Symphony No. 3. I can't focus on music very well anymore. It's hard to remember why I used to love it. I turn the speaker off.

"Eliza, say something! Eliza is here too," Alison says. Static cracks in the background and mixes with Eliza's laugh.

"Yes! I'm here too! I miss you, Chloe!" I picture her wide blue eyes. I hope she is doing okay. Eliza is one of the only ones who ever understood the darkness that sinks over my mind. I wish my own fog didn't make it so hard to see hers.

"Did Mrs. Jenson's class really teach you how to understand what everyone is saying there?" Allie asks. I smile. As usual, Allie is the fiercely practical one, overly concerned with

everyone else's wellbeing to the detriment of her own. I wish I could untangle the anxiety from her chest.

"Yes. I get around well enough. My Spanish has gotten a lot better."

"When will you send us pictures??" Eliza asks.

"Um...I'm saving them all to show you when I'm back home." The words fall out of my mouth and then I am forced to confront them. I think about that, about going home and facing my mom again, about the fake smiles and the town full of people telling me to just be happier. I think about Alison and Eliza, about concocting stories of my Spanish adventures, about hiding the truth until the day I die, about preserving their innocence and the impossibility of keeping the world from being burdened by me.

And as I smile and laugh my way through the conversation with the girls who think I'm doing better now, I know deep inside that I'm not going home. I try to memorize the cadences of Alison and Eliza's voices and their familiarity is agony in my chest. I hope that the truth of the world doesn't destroy them the way it destroyed me.

"Okay well...We're going to go now," Allie says.

"Have a great week!!" Eliza chimes in.

"Yeah." I swallow, a warm sense of calm flooding my veins. "Goodbye, guys. Talk to you later."

"Bye, Chloe!!"

I plan my death carefully. This time, I will not mess this up. Raiding my dad's medicine cabinet, I pull out anything that seems dangerous in high doses, googling when I am unsure. Midol, Advil, Benadryl, iron supplements, a full bottle of cough syrup. I shake pills into zip lock bags and carefully place their bottles back.

I sit down on my bed slowly, back aching. Dad will be back within the hour. I decide that I will die tomorrow. It is October 9<sup>th</sup>, 2011. I am not afraid.

I step into darkness. Silence  
wraps around me and  
ushers me into  
sanctuary.  
I am  
falling. Beauty meets me  
in echoes. I can  
breathe again.

The day I am to die I wake up with more energy than I have had in months. I make a cup of coffee and listen to Fantasia in F minor before discarding my daily pill in the top desk drawer. I briefly consider taking my whole pile of pills, but if Zoloft didn't kill me the first time, I doubt it will now. And this is going to work. I'm not going to wake up in the hospital again with my stomach pumped.

I sit on the bed and lay my assortment of pills out in front of me, organizing by color and size. For a moment, I just sit there, listening to the complete silence of the apartment, reveling in the power coursing through my veins. For so many months, I have felt hopeless against the sea of darkness inside of me. I've been stumbling, trying to find some way to regain my footing only to find myself tossed back and forth, lost at sea. Depression isn't sadness. It's poison seeping into my mind, and if I cannot control my life, I will control my death instead.

No one ever told me suicide would make me feel powerful.

I look around at the room. This will be the last place I'll ever see. Sunlight streams in from the window, splashing patterns of light across my bed. The steady desk and dresser stand resolute. I hope that Eliza and Allie will forgive me for this. I cross my legs and sit up straight. It is important

that it happens this way, tucked away in the corner of an apartment, hiding from civilization. It is important that there is no one to witness, no one to cry, no collateral damage. It is important that I am no longer a burden, a problem for someone to fix.

The time has come. Lifting the first little pile of pills to my mouth, I take a long drink of water and swallow. Something shifts within me. I pause, hand on my stomach. *What was that lurch?* I shouldn't be feeling any effects yet; I just took a handful of ibuprofens. Lifting up my shirt, I inspect it more carefully. Everything looks normal, but then my stomach visibly shifts again.

My world is on fire. *Why am I crying? What is happening to me?* I can't die. I've never known something with so much certainty. I cannot die while this baby is still inside of me. My stomach lurches again and I imagine a tiny foot kicking into me. Tears stream down my face and I dash them away. *Is the poison leaking into you too, little baby?* I want to keep this darkness inside of me away from all the people I love, away from mom and dad and Eliza and Alison. I know that means I will have to stay away from them forever, that I must be the casualty in this mess. But I look down at my stomach, the bulge I've been heaving around all this time, never even considering the truth. *I have to give this baby a chance to get away from me too.*

Standing up as swiftly as I can manage, I grab the little trash can by my desk and sweep the assortment of pills into it. There. It's done. I take a deep breath and then open the top drawer on my dresser. My pile of blue pills sits there like a collection of tears. Carefully, I take today's pill and place it in my mouth, swallowing hard. It tastes like failure. I stroke my stomach gently. The sunlight streams in, enveloping us, and I make a promise. *I'll go to therapy. I'll take these stupid pills. I'll give you every chance you have to be born and be okay and be raised in a family nothing like my own.* It's October 10<sup>th</sup>, 2011.

And I am terrified.

## Handle Me Softly

### Summer 2024

Your pale fingers tie themselves in knots in your lap. Your eyes flick from the ground to my face and back again. Biting your lower lip, you perch high on the very end of the recliner, a bird ready to take flight at any sign of trouble. I want to throw my arms around you and tell you that this is that best day of your life, that things will be different now, that you are safe, but I know that you are not in fact sitting across from me. You are drowning, your mind submerged in thoughts and fears, and it is a long road to get to you. Your hands clench and unclench carefully four times.

“Evelyn?” I say gently. “Can I show you your room?”

You breathe. *In and out. In and out. In and out. In and out.* Four times. I know this is a small piece of your puzzle, but every part is important to me. You look up into my eyes.

“Yes.” Your voice cracks a little and you blush and look away. “I’d like to see it.”

I walk down the hall, head tilted slightly back to hear the soft sound of your feet stepping across the plush carpet behind me. Your room is painted with soft lilac walls that Michael spent hours getting exactly right. It had been painted pale blue for the baby boy we’d expected to be sleeping here, but once I learned that lilac was your favorite color, nothing else would do. The white lace curtains float on the summer breeze that slips through your window screens.

“I love it,” you whisper. “Um...” You walk in and turns slowly around the room, soaking in every detail. “Sorry I don’t know what to say a lot. I’m just...not sure what to do in a house I won’t be leaving soon.”

The catch in your voice rips into my chest. “Don’t worry.” I swallow hard. “I’m sure it’s a lot to handle all at once.”

You stand, one foot tapping carefully into your white carpet. After four taps, you sink down on the bed, relief and exhaustion filling your eyes. “Thank you.” I do not know how a voice so small can crush me.

I decide to give you some space. Hearing the garage door close, I excuse myself to meet Michael in the kitchen. Michael walks inside, closing the side door quietly behind him. For a moment I just stand in the doorway, looking at him. You have no idea how much this tall, kind man is going to love you.

“Did Evelyn arrive alright?” A furrow creases in his brow. “I’m so sorry I couldn’t get off early.”

I cross the kitchen and wrap my arms around him, breathing in the warm, earthy scent. “It’s okay, honey. She made it. She’s unpacking her bag and getting settled in her new room.” I pause.

“We’re...parents.” I whisper. It didn’t seem real in the courtroom. It doesn’t even seem real now to think that you have gone twelve years of your life passed from person to person and now somehow you are mine to love for the rest of my days.

Michael smiles warmly and cups my chin with a gentle hand. “Yes, we are.”

We stand there together for a moment, unsure of what to do before Michael walks over to the counter and starts the coffee pot. “Well then let’s drink coffee as parents.”

I wonder if you are okay. I want to go and check on you, but I don’t want you to feel claustrophobic. I know that being close to people is difficult for you. I know that your brain is drowning in anxiety. I just want you to know that I understand, and I am unsure how to communicate that when I have come home from work and taken off the title “psychologist” and donned this new one: “mom.”

“We’re going to need to take her to a therapist.” I blurt out over my giant mug of coffee.

Michael looks up calmly. "Honey, you are a therapist."

"I know, but how is she supposed to get used to me as a mother if I also talk to her like a counselor?"

He nods. "Okay that's fair. It's not like you don't know the other counselors in town. We can take her in next week maybe when she's more settled." He reaches across our little kitchen table and squeezes my hand. "I know you're worried about her, but she's going to be okay. You deal with abuse and OCD cases every day. She just needs us to love her right now, okay?"

He's right. I do deal with all forms of sadness every day, but not one of those clients have ever ripped my heart completely raw with one little half smile. You have only lived in my house for 2 hours, but my love for you is already a lump lodged in my throat.

There is a small knocking sound and we turn to see you standing in the doorway, knuckles wrapping softly on the frame. Four tiny knocks. You smile, but I can see that your hands are trembling.

"Evelyn!" Michael's eyes light up when he sees you. "Do you want to come sit with us?"

Your eyes focus on the chair right beside mine and you bite your lip to stop its trembling. "Um...can I have a glass of water?"

"Of course." I get a glass down from the cabinet beside the fridge and fill it for you. "Here you go," I say gently, holding the glass out to you.

You freeze, eyes wide, and I want to know what thoughts are catapulting around your mind. You take one tiny step toward me and then a bigger step back. "I..." Whatever word you are trying to utter dies on your lips.

I am beginning to understand the way your mind works. I want to dig up all your compulsions and particularities and find the root, the fear the is bending you to its will. But I know

that I cannot push you too hard. Tears are welling up in your eyes and your hand is quivering with both the tension of straining for the glass of water and the effort to prevent yourself from taking it. I need you to feel safe before you will ever start to unravel the threads you are so twisted within.

“Evelyn,” I say gently. “How far away do you need to stay?”

You look at the ground. “Four feet.” The words are mumbled, tiny words floating through the space between us like microscopic butterflies.

“Okay. Then we will do that as long as you need.”

I place the glass of water on the counter and back away. You look up at me, mouth falling slightly open in surprise. Cautiously, you pick up the glass of water and take a small sip. “Most people just force me to do what they want.”

“I’m sorry.”

Michael stands. “Do you drink coffee, Evelyn?”

You dare to smile a little bit bigger this time. “I love coffee.”

Michael takes a big lilac mug with a cursive E down from the cabinet and fills it with coffee. “We thought you would like this mug.” He doesn’t tell you that he custom ordered that mug for you weeks ago from a local pottery artist. The omission makes me love him even more. Michael walks out of the kitchen.

“Let’s go sit in the dining room to drink these, okay?”

He sits your mug at the far end of the dining room table, so that you will feel safe. You collapse into the chair, eyes filled with tears. “Thank you,” you say softly.

“Of course.” I say, and Michael squeezes my hand under the table. “We want you to feel welcome here.”

---

Six days later, the doorbell rings for announcing Alison and Eliza's arrival. Our weekly dinners have been standing occasions for almost two years now, but I called Allie ahead of time to fill her in on the basics of life with you living with us. I want to make sure that we give you time to open up and don't cause unnecessary anxiety. I read all about your panic attacks and development of OCD throughout your years in the foster system, and I am doing everything possible to make this transition as smooth as possible for you.

Alison gives me a big hug in the entryway. "How have you been?" she asks.

I smile. "It's been hard, but good."

Eliza looks excited. "Where's Evelyn?"

You're in your room where you spend most of your time. I think you have less anxiety and less pressure to follow the rules and rituals created by your mind when you're alone, so you retreat whenever possible. I am grateful that it's summer and I don't have to force you to get on the bus every day.

"Evelyn," I stick my head down the hall on our way to the dining room and call for you. "Our guests are here if you would like to come meet them."

I hear your feet pattering softly down the hall as we set the table. You peek around the doorframe carefully. I've noticed that you like to see people before they see you. I can't wait for the day when you know that there isn't anyone you need to be afraid of in our house.

"Oh hi!" Eliza chirps when she sees you. "I'm Eliza!" Her fuzzy red hair is escaping the bun she tied it into, but her face always communicates complete interest in whomever she is speaking to.

"Hi," You say softly. You take a few steps into the room and brush your bangs out of your eyes. "I'm Evelyn."

Alison smiles. “My name is Alison. It’s nice to meet you. I used to be a patient of your... mother’s.” She seems to hesitate on that word, but neither you nor I fault her for it. We both know how complicated this whole thing is. “We started getting together for dinners to catch up once I finished treatment like...wow it’s been more than three years now.”

I feel pride rush through me. Alison has improved remarkably since I started treating her for anxiety and PTSD six years ago. I loved having her as a client. I love having her as a friend even more.

“That’s cool,” You say as you carefully take your customary place at the end of the table. Alison and Eliza give you space like I requested.

Earlier in the day, Michael roasted a chicken and I made the potato and veggie sides. Eliza and Alison fill us in on their week. Alison just received a promotion in her interior design firm and Eliza and her husband Peter just adopted a new puppy.

“Evelyn, would you ever want to adopt a dog?” Michael asks you.

I look down toward you when you don’t respond and you’re just sitting there, holding your steak knife and staring at it with shaking hands.

“Evelyn? What’s wrong?” I ask.

Your eyes never stray from the serrated edge. Your lips are quivering, and I can see the thoughts whizzing around behind your eyes, too fast for me to read. Despite the attention of the entire table being focused at you, you don’t move a muscle. Sheer fear is written all over your face.

“Evelyn?” Michael calls your name again as I slowly stand up.

The moment I move, you drop the knife with an alarming clatter onto your plate, rush to your feet, and run from the room, tears streaming down your pale cheeks.

Michael, Eliza, Alison and I exchange worried glances. “I’m going to check on her.” I say and excuse myself to follow you.

You’re sitting in the hallway with your back against the wall and your knees tucked up to your chin. Slowly, I crouch down a comfortable distance from you.

“Evelyn? Hey... talk to me. I just want to know what’s going on in your head.”

You turn a tear streaked face toward me and vehemently shake your head. That fear is creeping back into your eyes. “No...no I can’t tell you.”

“Why not?”

You frown, clearly expecting me to push the issue farther. “I.. you... you wouldn’t want to keep me.” Burring your face in your arms, you cry harder.

“Aw no, Evelyn listen to me. No matter what happens, I will *always* want you. This is your home now, okay? I need you to understand that or we’ll never be able to work on anything.” I inch a little bit closer to you. “I’m not going to hurt you.”

You look up and your eyes go dark and stormy. “No! Don’t move. I was going to stab someone, okay? I’m not scared of *you*. I have to stay away from people or I’ll hurt them.”

Lightbulbs explode to life in my mind. “Did you ever actually *want* to stab someone, Evelyn?”

Horror darkens your features. “What? No, of course not! But I couldn’t stop myself. I knew I was going to anyway!”

“Evelyn...I know you were diagnosed with OCD. They have something they are very afraid of and that causes them to have all kind of rules and rituals to make that anxiety go away. In your case, you’re afraid that you’ll hurt someone and not be able to stop yourself, so you

convinced yourself that you have to stay away from people and do things in sets of four. Things like that. Does that make sense to you?”

You take your arms away from your face slowly, features hardened in a mask of doubt. “I don’t know...”

I’ve read your file backward and forward. You’ve never caused someone harm from being too close to them, but plenty of people have caused you harm being too close to you. I wonder what it was like for you to have to hide from the people who were supposed to take care of you. I want to take you in my arms and promise that this house isn’t anything like some of those others, that you can let down your defense mechanisms here, but you stand up and slowly walk back to your room, a concentrated frown on your face.

“I’ll think about it,” you say softly.

---

Progress is painfully slow, but somehow, I love you more every day. After the first time I take you to the library down the street, you start going there most afternoons. You come back with a stack of books and tell Michael and I all about them over dinner. After a few weeks, you get into poetry. You find a book of poems by a teenage girl published after her death, and we listen to you read them as we sip our big mugs of coffee. I think something about the poetry touches your heart in a deeper place than any other words could. My co-worker Dr. Springstein is a great match for you and your counseling sessions progress well as she starts you on some low-dosage medication and takes you through cognitive-behavioral therapies.

I still hear your crying in your sleep.

Sometimes I sit outside your door and cry with you. I wish to know which pictures and words haunt you in the night. I wish that I could just reach through your door and hug you and knowing that my hugs would only cause you fear makes the whole thing even harder.

You do think about my words. You're remarkably curious and your brain makes connections at lightning speed. When I come home from work, you sit on the couch across from me and ask me questions about OCD. *How do people get OCD? Does everyone with OCD think they will accidentally kill someone? Are there any medicines that fix OCD? Do you have any books about OCD? I've only had this for a couple years; will it go away?*

I try to answer you as honestly and fairly as possible. I teach you about cognitive restructuring and antidepressants used for OCD. I let you read books and case studies and I listen without judgement when you tell me about how those intrusive thoughts of harming people slowly took over your brain. Then we talk about music and books and you tell me funny stories that make me laugh until I cry. I don't directly suggest any remedies or cure-alls, but slowly you start to sit a little closer to me on the couch.

---

On Saturdays I go grocery shopping. Usually, you sit curled up in your bed reading, but one day in early August, you follow me out to the car.

"Can I come?" you ask quietly, feet nervously tapping on the driveway.

I smile. "Of course."

You get in the backseat and we drive to Trader Joe's listening to the radio. When we pull into the parking lot, I step out onto the asphalt, but you don't follow. Frowning, I walk around to your side of the car and tap on your window gently.

"Evelyn, are you okay in there?" I call through the door. "Are you coming?"

You look up at me, eyes wide through the tinted window. “I...”

I step back, giving you room, and you open the door a few inches. “I just...”

“Talk to me.” I know that it’s hard for you to get all the screaming thoughts out of your mind and into your words. “What are you feeling?”

“There are people in there,” you say softly, and I nod.

“Yes, there are. And you’re not going to do anything terrible. I promise.”

Your hands are shaking and you struggle to take a deep breath. “I’m not going to do anything terrible,” you whisper. “I’m not going to do anything terrible. I’m not going to do anything terrible. I’m not going to do anything terrible.”

*4 times.* “Evelyn,” I make my voice as soft and gentle as I can. “Say it one more time.”

Your eyes are wide. I know that the thought of breaking the rituals causes you more anxiety. I smile encouragingly. “Remember the cognitive behavioral therapy?” You’ve been doing CBT in counseling and we’ve had endless conversations on the couch about the theories behind OCD treatment. *Please, try,*

You shiver even though it’s summer. “I...I’m not...I’m not going to do anything terrible.”

In your mind, everything is about to go to hell. You broke a cardinal rule. You screwed up the patterns. Now you really will cause someone harm. “It’s not true,” I whisper, trying to assuage the torrent in your mind. “That’s not your mind talking. It’s the OCD, remember?”

You smile up at me bravely through the opening in the car door and unbuckle your seatbelt. “I believe you. I can do it. Let’s go inside.”

My heart aches with how much I love you.

---

The first day of school comes before either of us is ready for it. You're awake and ready to go, bags packed, wringing your hands nervously in the entryway. I leave the passenger seat open for you in the car, but, per usual, you opt for the backseat, far out of reach.

For the first few minutes, we ride in silence before you speak.

"You know I'm going to have to sit next to kids, right?"

I nod. "What are you going to do about that?"

I glance up at your face in my rearview mirror, watching you bite your lip in concentration as you think of a response. "I'm going to remind myself that those thoughts of hurting people aren't actually things I'm thinking. They are things the OCD thinks for me and then tries to trick me with. Then I will try to make a friend so that it knows I'm not afraid of it."

I smile and blink away the tears. "Can I tell you a secret?"

"Sure."

"You're the smartest twelve-year-old I've ever met."

You grin at me in the mirror, eyes squinting up into a perfect smile. This time last year, I was coping with the reality that I wouldn't ever be able to give birth to my own children and planning to hopefully bring home a little baby to call my own. Who would have known that I would be here, driving my daughter to her first day of 7<sup>th</sup> grade?

I park in the drop off parking at Central Davidson Middle School. I know that you don't need me to help you, but I get out anyway and open the passenger door for you. I notice that your backpack zipper isn't all the way closed, but I don't want to stress you out right before school starts, so I keep my distance. You can take care of yourself.

"Have a good day okay, Evelyn?"

You nod, braids bouncing down your back. Your hands are still clenched into small fists, but your eyes no longer look haunted. “I’ll do my best.”

“Good. And you call if you need anything at all, ok? I took the day off from meeting with clients, so I can come pick you up on a moment’s notice.”

You laugh. “Okay, okay. I’ll call if there’s an emergency.” Turning to walk toward the front steps of the school, you take a few steps and then pause. I am heading back around the car, but I turn back to you when I see your movement stop in my peripheral vision.

“You okay, honey?”

Taking a steadying breath, you wrap your arms around me tightly. “I love you, mom,” you whisper softly and then let go. I watch you walk up those tall steps with vision that swims and blurs. What did I ever do to deserve something as beautiful as this?

I wipe away my tears and smile bigger than I have in months. “I love you too, Evelyn,” I whisper.

## Find My Way Back Home

Fall 2042

Fall leaves crunch beneath my boots as my feet trace the familiar path home. Inhaling the crisp Vermont air, I practice breaking the news to the family at dinner. “Guys, I didn’t get into UPenn.” *Too straightforward.* “Even though I have been accepted into 4 other top schools, I didn’t get into UPenn.” *Still too negative.* “UPenn decided I was not the best fit for their program.” I sigh, running a hand through my hair. I’m only a few blocks from the house and I’m not any closer to the right combination of words. Maybe I’ll just leave the letter out for them to find. It’s bad enough that I had to read it; I shouldn’t have to explain my rejection to everyone else too.

The sky is darkening when I catch sight of the figure in the shadows. Across the street, a hooded man is looking toward me from the opening of a small alleyway. Taking a shuddering breath in surprise, I increase my pace slightly. It’s *probably nothing.* I take a few more steps before turning back to look. The hooded figure has walked out onto the street. Fog begins to spread itself out into the road. The man is definitely looking at me, and it seems like he’s walking this way. I’m pretty sure you’re not supposed to start running if you suspect someone of following you. That would give away the fact that I’d seen him and noticed him following. I try to walk as fast as I can without drawing attention to myself. *Did they find out the truth? They finally sent someone to punish me for what I did that night.* Icy fear slides down the back of my neck. Knowing I shouldn’t look, I turn back anyway, half expecting the man’s face to be inches from my own.

There is no one in the street.

*Where could he have gone? Is he trying to cut me off somewhere before I make it back to*

*the house?* I knew that someone would come for me one day, but a little part of me was hoping the whole thing could just fly under the radar forever. Seeing that there is no one visibly watching me, I break into a jog, still too afraid to risk an all- out run. I cover a couple blocks quickly, but my heart won't stop racing. Footsteps echo behind me and my stomach lurches into my throat. *It's now or never.* I take off in a full sprint, grateful for my years of football practices and cross country meets. Frantically, my arms and legs pump as I gulp oxygen and fly around the last corner before my house. They found me. What am I going to do?

After scaling the porch stairs, I lean over, breathless, and turn to see my pursuer. Once again, the street is empty. *I guess they gave up when they saw I was going to make it inside before they could catch me.* Before entering the house, I quickly try to regain my composure. I am too afraid to stay out here long, but I don't know if I should say anything to my parents. I can't exactly tell them I was being chased without explaining why someone would chase me. Mom is setting the table when I enter. Lauren is already at her place to the right of the table, happily chattering on about her day at school. *What would it be like to be the favorite child?*

She looks up at me as the draft reaches them. "Aaron, you're home! How was your day? Did you do anything interesting? Where did you go after school?"

"I'm fine," I mutter, closing the door behind me.

"Go help your father finish up in the kitchen." Mom continues spreading forks to the left of each plate.

Grunting, I drop my backpack at the foot of the stairs and walk into the kitchen. Dad is stirring a pot of rice on the stove with his back to me.

"Hey dad. I'm home. Mom said to help you."

He turns around and smiles. "Hey Aaron. Sure, you can help. Here, you can finish

chopping these veggies for the stir fry.” He gestures to the cutting board on the counter full of half cut vegetables. I nod and slowly start cutting, trying to focus on the rhythm of the knife on the cutting board and not the man in the street. *If they know the truth, they will come back soon.* I squint at the piles of onion and pepper. *No, I can think through it all later.* Carefully, I drop the little piles of veggies into a skillet my dad is stirring. What if they came to the house and hurt dad and mom and Lauren?

We work in silence for a few moments before dad clears his throat. “So, you heard back from any colleges yet?”

I swallow and stare down at the cutting board, keeping my back to him. “No, not yet.”

“They sure are cutting it close.” I hear the tightness in my father’s voice.

*It’s only October.* “Yeah, they should get their act together and not leave me waiting around.”

“What about scholarship offers?”

*Dad, I don’t even want to play soccer in college.* “I’m sure those will be coming in soon as well.”

“You know that no one would accept you if they knew what you did.”

I whip around to face him, that ice cold fear back in an instant, waging war for control of my body. *He knows.*

My dad just smiles coldly. “Everything okay?” He says in a hushed voice. “You look a little pale.”

My heart has wedged itself up into my throat, panic like static in my veins. *How did he find out? What is he going to do? Did he call that man who chased me here?* “Um...yeah.” I manage to spit out the words. *Be cool.* “Yeah, I’m okay.”

My father's eyes remain locked on mine for a couple seconds too long. I feel the weight of my life held in his hands. Swallowing hard, I look away. I can see it in his eyes. He'd turn me in in an instant. *Who told him that I... that I...* I freeze. That I did what? What's the secret? My chest heaves. *What's happening to me? Why can't I remember the secret?*

"Peter, Is the food ready?" My mom's voice in the dining room snaps me back to reality.

"Yes, honey. Be right there."

My dad is still looking at me. He smiles menacingly. "Aaron? Are you ready to eat?" Horrified, I nod and follow him into the dining room, trying to go over what I remember. A man in a creepy hood chased me home. He is only one of the men who are after me. I have been waiting, hoping that no one found out, but somehow my dad knows. There was a night that I did something terrible. *When? What did I do?* The men know, and they want to kill me. I don't think dad will stop them.

Lauren tells mom and dad funny stories while I eat silently, mind reeling. I go back through my memories and then I go back through them again, searching for a clue, trying to determine where exactly my memories leave off.

\*\*\*\*\*

As the weeks go by, I realize how vulnerable I am. Not only do I have a group of violent men pursuing me for my crimes, I cannot even remember what my terrible secret is. I have no idea how to keep myself safe from these men. Deep inside, I remember them. Some ancient, far off part of me knows these men and everything they are capable of. I knew that they would come for me sooner or later, but no matter how many hours I spend staring at my bedroom ceiling going over the events of the past month, I cannot remember anything new.

There are no more direct sightings of my pursuers for a couple weeks, but my phone

makes strange clicks when I make or receive calls. I am confident that they bugged my phone in an attempt to track my movements. At the beginning of the second week, I realize that I cannot continue to work my job at the library front desk and remain safe, so I quit. I am far too easy to find there. My boss, Marina, doesn't seem to understand even though it's very clear that there are all sorts of things with my name or picture around the library: the "meet the staff" billboard, various group photos at country events, rows of labeled lockers. All it would take is for one of the men to find my locker and I would be screwed. As often as possible, I pretend to be sick to avoid school and soccer practice. Despite walking home with friends, I have never felt such consistent fear. I know that it is only a matter of time before they catch me, and I would cease all activity entirely but that would warn my dad that I am onto him. As much as possible, I spend my time locked in my bedroom, pacing back and forth or lying on my bed thinking. I draft constant plans to escape and remain safe, but they are all flawed and my trash can overflows with crumpled papers.

\*\*\*\*\*

A few days later, dad calls me right after school lets out.

"Aaron, hey can you go by Walmart and get some milk? We're out and your mom needs it to make dinner."

"Um..." *I can't say no.* "Sure, yeah. I'll go." I hang up, hands shaking.

I forget Christian is walking beside me until he speaks. "Dude, are you okay?"

"Huh? Oh yes. I just have to go to the store for my dad...um...can you come? Do you need anything from Walmart?" My words rush out and stumble over each other.

"Sorry, bro. I have to get to practice." Christian looks down at his gym bag. "Are you not coming?"

*What if they know my routine now and they are waiting for me at practice? Anyone could tell them I play. "Um...no sorry. I have to go." I rush down the stairs. I'm going into town alone? I'm screwed.*

Our Walmart is only five blocks away from the school, but anything can happen in five blocks. I start off, walking as fast as I can without breaking into a jog and arousing attention. There are surprisingly few people out on the street for 3:00 in the afternoon. I shiver, but it isn't cold.

Then I see them.

Two men in black hoodies are walking on the opposite side of the street, coming toward me. One of them brushes a hand up to his side and I see the faint shape of a gun. Frantically, I look around for a path of escape as my stomach flips over. Just ahead, a city bus pulls into a bus stop. Legs leaping into action, I close the gap between myself and the bus, jumping onto the first step at the last minute.

The bus driver rolls his eyes as I enter, breathing heavily. He obviously thinks I was just running late. I flash my high school ID for a millisecond before running to the back of the bus. Thankfully students get free bus rides so I don't have to waste my time figuring out the cost. *I don't even know where this bus is going.*

It doesn't matter. I look out the window and see the two men glaring at the back of the bus as we drive off. They must have figured out what happened. *That was too close.* I close my eyes, feeling my hands involuntarily tightening into fists. The aimless hum of chatter fills the bus. *What am I going to do?*

My phone makes a strange beep in my pocket. *I've never heard it make a sound like that.* Lifting it up to the window lighting, I inspect it. Nothing seems to be amiss. I don't have any

new notifications or missed calls. The phone vibrates in my hand and makes the sound again. It takes me a minute to realize the truth. *The trackers. They activated the trackers after they lost me. I have to get off this bus.*

Five minutes pass before the bus makes another stop. I sit perched on the edge of my seat, heart throbbing in my chest. I lay my phone on the ground under my seat. As soon as the breaks screech us to a stop, I am on my feet, running off the bus. I cannot breathe or think clearly until I am standing at the bus stop, watching the bus carry my phone around the next corner. Sinking down onto one of the benches in the bus stop, I look around. I haven't gone too far, only a couple miles away from the Walmart. Down the street, a group of people is sitting outside eating lunch. The wind carries their laughter up to me and scatters it across the empty bus stop. Cars zoom past, going 55 in a 35 per usual. Other than that, I don't see anyone nearby.

I am wondering how I am going to make it back when one of the members of the lunch group steps away and pulls out what looks like a cell phone. The man looks up at me. I can't see his eyes, but the tilt of his head seems cruel. That doesn't seem good. I start looking around for another bus. *One should come by soon.* The man is talking to someone on the phone now. He gestures toward me, seemingly frustrated with whoever is on the other end. *Because the other person thinks I'm on the bus that they are tracking.* My heart rate lurches up again, but I force myself to remain entirely still. *This man does not know that I am onto him. He is calling his accomplices. That means that he isn't going to kill me right here in front of those other people.* A couple blocks away, I see another bus coming toward me. I breathe slowly and carefully, trying not to draw any attention to myself or betray the jolt of relief at the sight of that bus. As it gets closer, I still don't move a muscle. The man hangs up the phone and returns to the rest of the lunch group. It's stupid of him not to keep an eye on me, but I smile to myself. *This is the first*

*stroke of luck I've had.* As quickly as possible, I stand and walk to the open door of the bus, climbing up the three steps and, once again, finding a seat in the back. I watch the man as we pull away from the curb, but he doesn't look up again. I wonder how much trouble he will be in when the other men arrive to find me gone. That thought makes me smile for a moment before fear overwhelms me again. It's only a matter of time before they find me. *Did dad arrange all of this? After all, he was the one who sent me to the store in the first place.* I swallow. I need to lose them. I need to switch busses again.

I change buses three more times before I see another one of the men. This one is standing on the sidewalk when he makes eye contact with me through the bus window. Stomach sinking, I watch him pull out his phone. *How do they keep finding me? Why is this happening?* Tears well up in my eyes and I do my best to swallow them back. My stomach feels sick from the days I've spent in terror. Nausea crawls up into my throat.

*They're coming for me again. That man just told them where I am. I can't outrun these people.* The tears come. I try to dash them away, but it seems like there is another tear to instantly take its place. *What do I do?* Exhausted, I exit the bus at the next stop, fully expecting to walk into the arms of my pursuers, but there is only an old woman sitting at the stop. *I guess they haven't made it yet.* A payphone stands to the right of the benches. I could call a friend, but the men will pursue me wherever I go and I don't want one of my friends' families to be in danger too. *I could call mom at the office.* My mom might be in on the whole thing by this point, but maybe it would be worth a try. *If I'm going to die anyway, I might as well try all my options first.* I dig in my pocket for change.

The phone rings twice before Miranda answers. "Dr. Eliza Rennington's office. This is Miranda. How can I help you?"

“Hi um...it’s Aaron, Can I talk to my mom?”

“Oh of course sweetie. Hold on one moment.”

I look around nervously, searching for signs of my pursuers. Jazz music plays for a few minutes and then mom gets on the phone.

“Aaron? Where on earth have you been? Your father said you were just picking up something from the store but then he hasn’t heard from you in hours.”

My stomach lurches as I look around again. She genuinely sounds like she doesn’t know anything. “Can you come pick me up? I’m at a bus stop somewhere...” I search for identifying landmarks. “It’s stop number 52.”

“Well honey, I get off work in about 30 minutes. I’m sorry I had to work late today. I guess I could come in a half hour. Can’t you just take the bus home?”

“Mom...they’re going to catch me.” The tears start to leak out of my eyes again. I shouldn’t be standing here so visible. “Hurry. Please.”

“Who? What are you talking about?” Concern coats her voice. She really doesn’t know anything.

“These men. They found out that I did something terrible and they are coming for me and dad...I think dad helped them. They’ll be here soon. The man called them. Just hurry okay?”

“Okay, okay. I’m coming. Just stay there, okay Aaron?”

“Okay.”

Ten minutes later, mom pulls up in her Camry. Her long red hair was thrown hastily into a bun and she is still wearing her white doctor’s lab coat. I leap into the car, frantically looking behind us to see if anyone follows as she drives away.

“Now, Aaron. Tell me what’s really going on.”

I stumble through my explanation. “These men know about something terrible that I did. They have been following me and working with dad to make sure I get punished for my crime. I’ve been running from them from weeks, so I hide in my room and I had to quit my job.”

Concern darkens her eyes. *She doesn’t believe you. She already thinks you just quit your job because you’re lazy.* “And you’ve seen these men?”

“Yes! I’ve seen them and dad said he knows what I did too.”

“What did you do?”

I frown, feeling my story unraveling. “Um...I can’t exactly remember? I don’t know. It’s just all so fuzzy in my mind.”

She nods, struggling to keep the fear off of her face. “Honey, your father wouldn’t want to do anything to hurt you. You know that. He’s been kind and supportive of me since the moment your Aunt Alison introduced us. And he’s loved you since you were born. Do you not trust him?”

“I mean...I don’t know. I know what I heard.”

She nods again. “Okay. Let’s talk to him when we get home then.” She sees my terror in her peripheral vision and sighs. “I’ll make sure nothing happens. Do you remember Dr. Wickham?”

*One of mom’s psychiatrist friends.* “Yeah.”

“Good. He’s a wonderful man. I’m going to give him a call and make us an appointment.”

*She doesn’t believe you. She’s taking you to a shrink.* I hold my stomach to keep from vomiting.

\*\*\*\*\*

Dr. Wickham's office is simple, lit primarily by natural light streaming from the windows on the right. The psychiatrist himself sits in a big leather desk chair. Mom and I sit in smaller chairs across from him.

"So Aaron, have you heard of schizophrenia?"

"Schizophrenia? Crazy people have that, right? I'm not crazy!"

Dr. Wickham smiles gently. "No, Aaron, I don't think you're crazy. I do, however, think that you might be suffering from schizophrenia." He lifts a hand to stifle my protests. "Hear me out."

Mom looks at me pointedly. "We will."

Dr. Wickham nods. "Now, from what you've told me, it sounds like you are experiencing a delusion. A delusion is an irrational belief that is very difficult to get rid of. They are very common in people with schizophrenia, especially paranoid delusions like the one you seem to be having. It's actually common to believe that a phone or computer has been tapped by someone who means you harm. Oftentimes, things are used to support your delusion which, in reality, have no connection, such as the man who made the phone call. Most likely, he was just calling a family member or a friend, but your brain interpreted it as evidence that the men were pursuing you. Does this make sense so far?"

*I'm not crazy.* "Yes."

"Good. I think you've also experienced some hallucinations, such as when you heard your father tell you that he knew all about what terrible thing you did. Hallucinations aren't only things you see. You can also hear them. Since you didn't actually see your father's mouth move when he said that, it was likely just your mind projecting its fears onto your father."

I frown. I don't know if I want this man to be right. I'm not crazy. I know what I saw, but the idea of being free of those terrible men seems too good to be true. "You're saying no one is after me at all?"

"Correct," Dr. Wickham says. "I understand that this is difficult to believe. Oftentimes, people with schizophrenia struggle to comprehend how something they experienced so vividly can be a product of their brain. It's alright if this takes time."

He's right. I'm not entirely convinced. The feeling of that ice cold fear comes back to me. "Well, sir. I've been trying to fix this my way for a month now and it's not getting better, so I guess we can try this. What do you think I should do?"

Dr. Wickham smiles. "First of all, I want to encourage you. You're taking this very well. I'd like to get you started on an antipsychotic medication to lessen the symptoms of the delusions and hallucinations." He starts writing notes down on a paper. "You'll start off with 40mg of Latuda once a day. I'll see you every week as well to monitor your progress and help you along. Eliza, would it be possible to get the whole family in for sessions occasionally as well?"

Mom nods. "Of course, Nick. Thank you so much for your help."

We exit into brilliant sunlight. The chilly November air attacks my face and hands. I peer around the parking lot carefully, making sure that no one followed us here. There does not seem to be any strange men or strange cars.

"Aaron," mom says softly. "There's no one there."

For a moment, I breathe easily and then fear twists around my chest again as I realize the truth. Mom was in on it all along. *Of course.* I played right into their hands. *She's trying to convince me that I'm just crazy. Even Dr. Wickham could be in on it.*

“Aaron?” Mom is looking at me quizzically. She scrunches up her eyes and squints into the sunlight, eyes still unaccustomed to the outdoor lighting. “You ok?”

“Yeah, yeah. I’m good,” I say quickly and hop into the passenger’s seat. My hands are shaking. There is no longer any choice. As mom pulls out of the parking lot, my mind sorts through all of my plans of escape. I need to get out of this town as soon as possible.

## Within My Chaos

Spring 2031

*There is laughter down the hall. Sunlight glints off of the walls, pulling me forward, as my excited feet trace their way down the hardwood. Dad is talking to mom in the kitchen, telling her jokes and making her musical laughter glint that casts everything in a magical glow.*

*Fearless, my feet enter the room. The warm smell of cooking pancakes wafts up into my nose. Dad stands beside the griddle, flipping his customary Saturday morning pancakes with a practiced hand. Mom is beside him, steaming mug of tea in her hand. Crossing the kitchen floor, I squeeze my little body in between them. The scent of my dad's cologne mingles with the smell of the cooking pancakes. Mom laughs and reaches down for my hand. Placing my tiny hand in hers, I am in the safest place in all the world.*

*Looking up, stumble back in horror. My mother has no face. What has happened to her? Wavy brown hair fades into an empty abyss staring back at me. I scream...*

The impatient cry of my alarm awakens me. I hit snooze and lie there, staring at my ceiling. What just happened? The parents in my dream weren't the ones downstairs right now. They were my real parents, my birth parents. I recall my tiny hands and feet. I couldn't have been more than eight years old. My heart aches at the thought of how easily younger me squeezed herself so close to her parents, the way she so completely trusted the warmth and safety that seemed to saturate the house. No years of abuse, no screwed up Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder to mess up her life. The thought is so beautiful it wedges a headache between my eyes. I'll never know what it would have been like to grow up that happy.

Rolling over, I force myself to sit up. 9:00 AM. I should get up. *Not like you have anywhere to be soon.* I tell the voice in my head to shut up. No use in lying around all day even if I don't

have anything to do. Walking into my bathroom, I start a warm shower. I reach for my phone where it is charging on the counter and dial Aunt Alison's number. She picks up on the second ring.

"Hey, Evelyn. How are you?"

"I'm okay." I watch the fog slowly encroach on the mirror. "Could we get coffee tonight after you get off work? I have something I want to talk to you about."

She pauses for a moment. I can hear her trying to diagnose the nature of my mysterious conversation topic. When I don't say anything else, she responds. "Sure. I can do that. Do you want me to call Eliza and see if she can come too?"

I nod even though she can't hear me. "That would be great."

"Okay, honey. Let's meet at Corner Cup. Does 8:00 work for you?"

I laugh. "Uh....let me check my schedule...yes, yes it does."

"Aw don't worry about the whole school thing, ok? You're doing well now. It was just a rough patch. You have plenty of time, ok?"

I can feel the tension in my smile. "Okay."

\*\*\*\*\*

Aunt Eliza sips her caramel macchiato and watched my face carefully. Beside her, Aunt Alison stirs honey into her green tea. I'm lucky to have two people willing to make the drive from the city to see me. Mom lived close to them back in the day, but we moved to pursue the small town life when I was in middle school. I stare down into my back coffee and try to find my train of thought.

“Anyway, in this dream, I was just so happy with my real mom and I just... I can’t stop thinking about it.”

Aunt Eliza tucks her red hair behind her ears. “Did you mention this to your mother?”

“No no...I don’t want her to feel like she hasn’t been a good enough mom for me or something. She’s been great.”

Aunt Alison nods. “But you’re still not happy?”

“I mean...when I used to imagine my real mom, I pretended that she lived in Oregon by a big peaceful lake. She was always sunbathing by the water and just waiting up there for the day that I came to find her. I just...I guess I wonder what my life was supposed to be like, you know?” Biting my lip, I stare back into my coffee. “I mean I’m a college dropout with OCD that keeps coming back and recurring nightmares of stuff that happened when I was a kid.”

Aunt Alison reaches across the table and squeezes my hand. “I’m sorry, honey. I know it seems like the world dealt you a very unfair hand.”

“What can we do to help?” Aunt Eliza asks, placing her macchiato on the table emphatically.

I take a deep breath. “I want to find my birth mom.”

Silence.

“You...okay...” Aunt Alison struggles to buy herself time.

“That won’t change anything, you know?” Aunt Eliza says softly.

“I know,” I say. “But I need to try. I need to close that door once and for all. Just so I can resolve all those questions I’ve had for as long as I can remember.”

Aunt Alison sighs. “You want to know what life you could have had?”

“Yes. I need to know.”

They exchange a glance. Alison and Eliza have been supportive and kind to me since the day I was adopted, seven years ago. Being close friends with my mom, I started calling them “Aunt” very early on. The downside of this, of course, is that it’s difficult for them to agree to things behind mom’s back. I wait patiently, letting them have their silent debate.

After a moment, Aunt Eliza speaks. “Okay. We’ll help you.”

“Mostly because you’re going to do it anyway,” Aunt Alison adds. “I’d rather you at least have some help.”

I smile. “Thank you. Where should we start?”

Aunt Eliza finishes the last of her drink. “Well. I know the adoption agency your mom worked with. Do you remember Lisa?”

I nod. “Yeah. She was the case manager in the Vermont department, right? I mostly worked with my social worker back in the California office, but I met Lisa once or twice during the adoption process.”

“Well I’ll see if I can get a meeting with her later this week.”

I smile wryly. “Well, as you know, my schedule is open.”

\*\*\*\*\*

A week later, I drive into the city to meet them at the adoption office. My mind wanders as I drive, stress working its way down into my brain. OCD feels like a list of rules I can never perform perfectly: stay a perfect distance away from people at all times, always adjust the mirrors four times before driving, always wash my hands four times before leaving the bathroom, always

check four times that I have locked my bedroom door and closed the window blinds completely. I swallow and blink the tears away. After all this time, surely, I should be able to handle it all.

Pausing at a red light, I look around, trying to refocus my attention on something exterior. People step in front of my car at the crosswalk, stepping onto the sidewalk and passing beside the memorial fountain on their left. Chloe. Aunt Eliza and Aunt Alison knew Chloe Anne Coleman before she committed suicide. When you're from a small town, things like that don't happen often. After my Aunts helped Mrs. Coleman publish a book of Chloe's poetry, the town dedicated the memorial fountain to her. *What would it be like to just be remembered as the girl who died?* I read Chloe's poetry backward and forward after I moved here. Chloe seemed to understand the way the invisible darkness weighed down on my mind.

A car horn beeps behind me a fraction of a second after the light turns green. Rolling my eyes, I press down on the gas. There are only three other cars at the intersection. It's not like we have much of a traffic problem here in Westview.

The rest of the drive progresses slowly. Thoughts swirl around my brain like a whirlpool. *What will I discover today? What if my birth mom doesn't want to meet me? What if no one knows where she is? What if I never get better and I don't get to go back to school?* I try to keep my thoughts distracted by my surroundings. The spring Vermont countryside is lush and alive and watching it pass by helps to drown out my fears.

Aunt Alison and Aunt Eliza are already at the adoption agency when I arrive. Lisa ushers us into her roomy office. Hesitating, I sit down in one of the plush chairs. Lisa sits behind her desk. She hasn't aged well since I last saw her. Probably nearing her 70s now, the bags under her eyes have creased and she wears her hair slicked back into a tight bun.

I feel Aunt Alison's eyes on me to my right, waiting for me to break the silence first. Words spin in my head, bubbling up to my mouth but never being birthed into sentences. They are too close to me. I try to subtly slide my chair a few inches back, but everyone's eyes are on me. My hands are shaking. *Evelyn, relax. You know this is just the OCD. You're going to be okay.* I take a deep breath and silently whisper the words my mom always said. *Everyone is okay. This is safe. You will not do anything terrible. Relax.*

"So, Evelyn?" Lisa peers down at a clipboard. "You have questions about your birth family?"

"Yes." The word sounds more like a squeak. "Do you know anything at all? All I remember is my years in foster care."

Lisa pauses for an eternity, scanning the clipboard, remembering my case. "Well, you weren't born in the state," she says. "So, we don't have a lot of information in our files."

My chest tightens, and I struggle to breathe, waiting to see if she will continue.

"You probably know this, but the Webers, your adopted parents, were looking to adopt a baby boy at the time. Our office got a call from your case worker who was looking all over the country for a good home for you. Given Marian Weber's specialization in anxiety and trauma disorders, I gave her a call and asked her to at least consider it."

I nod. I've heard the story over and over. My mom says that she is grateful that I came into their family, but I know that I wasn't the child they were hoping for. "Do you know anything about my birth parents though?" *Please, tell me about the life I was supposed to have.*

"All we have in the files is that you were born to a young single woman. No father known. You were placed into foster care immediately."

My hope tips off the edge of a cliff and I watch it spiral slowly down. “Thank you,” I whisper.

“Hold on.” Lisa rummages around in a drawer and slides a business card across the desk to me. “This is the card for our San Jose office where your case was handled. I don’t know what information they can give you over the phone, but if you give them a call, you might learn something else.”

I take the card carefully between my fingers and hold onto it tightly. *I need this to work.*

“Thank you for your time,” Aunt Alison says. The other three women are standing to their feet and shaking hands. Pushing down thoughts of what is waiting on the other side of a phone call, I struggle to make my body obey me.

“Yes, thank you.” I smile Lisa’s direction, but my shaking fingers recoil at the thought of shaking someone’s hand. She does not seem to press the issue. Gratefully, we make our way out into the hall.

As soon as we are outside, I whip the card back out of my pocket. “Okay. I’m calling.”

Aunt Eliza laughs. “Now?”

“You expect me to just hold onto this thing?”

Aunt Alison looks at me gently. I think she would hug me if she didn’t know the anxiety that would cause me. “How about you come with us and get some lunch? I’ll get you some food and you can call there?”

Biting my lip, I consider it. “Okay. But is it okay if I don’t wait until after we eat?”

“Of course. You can call whenever you want.”

\*\*\*\*\*

We don't have long to wait to order at the local burger joint. 3:00 PM is an odd time to eat so there isn't a wait to be seated. The young waitress with wispy blonde hair bustles off to ring in our burgers and I stare down at the number on the little white card. Suddenly, I am terrified. *What if whoever answers tells me that my mom just didn't want me? Maybe she was perfectly happy alone and I would just bother her? Maybe she has other kids that she already loved. What if they don't know anything at all?*

I spin my straw around my Diet Coke, staring at the way the bubbles form around the ice. Aunt Eliza speaks first.

“Will waiting make you feel any better about it?”

I shake my head.

“Okay,” she says gently. “Then take a deep breath. Maybe they'll have all the answers you're looking for.”

Aunt Alison nods, trying to look encouraging but I can still tell that she thinks this is a bad idea. She thinks I'm just going to get disappointed. She probably isn't wrong.

The cheery male voice picks up on the second ring. “Hello, Whitehall Adoption, San Jose office. This is Trevor. How can I help you?”

My mouth is full of cotton. “Um...I... I have some questions about an adoption you processed.”

“Okay. Was the adoption in the last two years?” I hear clicks of a keyboard.

“No. It was seven years ago. A girl named Evelyn Fantasia... me.”

“Oh.” Trevor seems surprised. “Alright, Evelyn, let me transfer you to Maria. She should be able to help.” Elevator music rings hollow in my ears for a moment and I stare down at the table. In my peripheral vision, I see Aunt Alison and Aunt Eliza exchange a glance.

“Hello.” An older woman’s pleasant voice fills my ear. “This is Maria Johns, case manager with Whitehall Adoption. Can I help you, dear?”

“Yes. I’m Evelyn Weber. But I was Evelyn Fantasia. I’m looking for my birth mom. Someone in your office helped find a family to adopt me in Vermont.”

“Alright, honey. Let me see what I can find.” There is a pause at her fingers click on keyboard keys, accessing my file. I breathe slowly, crossing and uncrossing my legs a careful four times.

“Okay, dear. I have the file. I think I remember your case. Your adoption was unusual so it stands out. It looks like your mother lived in this area. You were born in a hospital less than an hour away and taken into foster care almost immediately.”

“She lives close to you?” My voice is a whisper.

“Well, she did, honey. It’s been nineteen years, so I can’t guarantee that she still does.”

*But she might. At least people there would know her.* “And...who was she?”

“Dear, I can’t give out names over the phone. That’s Whitehall policy. You’ll have to schedule an appointment and verify your identity first and I can sit down with you and tell you everything I know.”

“But I’m in Vermont right now.” *Please, tell me who she is?* The pleading slickens my voice despite my best efforts to remain professional.

“Alright, I understand. You can submit a request form and identification verification through mail and we can send it to our office closest to you.”

“Um...” Aunt Alison and Aunt Eliza look at me expectantly. “Can I call you back and let you know?”

“Of course, dear. I’ll be in the office until 6:00 today and starting at 9:00 tomorrow morning.”

I hang up. “Um... I either have to submit a request form by mail or fly to California.”

“I’m sorry.” Aunt Alison says gently.

Aunt Eliza takes a sip of her Sprite and watches me closely. “So, which are we going to do?”

“What? I mean I assumed I’d just submit the form and hope it doesn’t take them too long to get back to me.”

She nods, processing this information. “Are there any advantages to going there ourselves?”

Aunt Alison looks over at her like she lost a few marbles in the parking lot.

The words come out of me like a fountain. “She lived in the area. I was born less than an hour away from their office. Maybe she’s still there.”

Aunt Eliza nods and sips again. “So, we could possible track her down once we got a name.”

“I mean...yes.” I had also definitely thought of that.

“It’s your call, Evelyn.” She smiles and looks over at Aunt Alison. “I’ll come with you if you decide to fly.”

Aunt Alison hesitates and then sighs. “Okay, I will too as long as I can get off work.”

Excitement and fear rushes through me at once. “I...I guess we’re going to California.” I blink away the tears that threaten to spill from my eyes. “Um...I love you guys.”

The waitress comes back with our food on a big tray. “How are you all doing?” She asks in a much too excited voice.

Aunt Eliza laughs and her eyes say *I love you too*. “We’re doing really well actually.”

\*\*\*\*\*

Maria’s office is homey and lined with bookshelves. A large cinnamon candle sit on her desk, flicking and filling the room with its warm scent. After our long plan ride yesterday, Aunt Alison and Aunt Eliza seem eager to relax. But I sit awkwardly straight in my chair, fingers drumming on my leg in sets of four. Maria enters her office, holding a Starbucks cup. I know we’ve only been here for five minutes, but it feels like I’ve been waiting for her to get off her lunch break for years.

“Well, Hello.” Maria smiles. She has a kind, grandmotherly face. “You traveled quite a long way.”

“Hello.” I say quietly, but I really want to beg her to just tell me who my mom is and get it over will. The receptionist had me fill out the paperwork and made a copy of my ID. My chest heaves. Surely, there is nothing else left to do.

“How has your day been?” Aunt Alison asks the older woman.

“Very well.” Maria says pleasantly. “Yourselves?”

“Good,” says Aunt Eliza. “We got in late last night and took our time leaving the hotel this morning.”

Maria begins typing at her ancient desktop. My stomach is doing flip flops, reminding me of all the routines I need to do to keep everyone safe. I know my OCD is talking and I try to shut it up. The routines aren’t going to make this any easier.

“Okay, Miss Evelyn,” Maria says after a moment.

“Uh huh?” My voice is barely a breath.

“It looks as though you were born to one Chloe Anne Coleman at St Francis Memorial Hospital on February 10<sup>th</sup>, 2011.”

“Excuse me?” My mind doesn’t understand what is happening to me. “Chloe...Coleman? And she’s from California?”

The question hangs in the air. Aunt Eliza’s hands are shaking. I can’t hear Aunt Alison breathing anymore.

“No,” Maria says and our chests collectively cave in. “She was living in San Francisco at the time. You were signed into foster care by your grandfather, who Chloe was saying with. She was sixteen years old. I’m not sure where your mother is from. It doesn’t say. Is everything alright?” She stares at us, startled by the ghostly faces that look back at her.

“Um...would you like to see a picture of your mother at the time you were born?”

I move my head and I assume she takes the gesture as an affirmative, because she hits a button on the keyboard and a printer wizzes to life behind me. None of us say a word. Maria stands and hesitantly walks over to retrieve the photo. She places it gingerly in my hands and my world implodes.

I’ve seen my mother before. On the back of her poetry book I’ve been annotating since Aunt Alison gave me my first copy when I was thirteen years old and kept accruing fines on the library copy. I’ve seen my mother before on the plaque by her fountain I walked past on the way to High School every day. I’ve seen my mother in the shadows in Aunt Eliza’s eyes and the carefully controlled anxiety that lurks behind Aunt Alison’s steps. What would it be like to have your best friend kill herself? What would it be like to have a mom who killed herself? My stomach flips over and I feel suddenly nauseous.

Aunt Eliza is crying. Aunt Alison mumbles our thank yous and we stumble from the office, my hands clinging tightly to the picture of sixteen-year-old Chloe. My brain had been filled with so many fears of what I would find, but I had never even known to fear this.

There is silence in our rental car as Aunt Alison begins to drive back to the hotel. I pull knees up to my chin in the backseat. Tears pull at the corners of my eyes but I'm not even really sure why. Aunt Eliza is the first of us to speak.

“She said she got to go on a study abroad that year.”

Aunt Alison is quiet for a moment. “I thought we'd made it through all of this, you know?”

“Yeah. Imagine what it would have been like to have to keep that secret though...she must have felt so alone.” Aunt Eliza's voice breaks. “I know there wasn't anything else we could have done, but sometimes I still wonder...”

I stare down at the photo in my lap. My mom killed herself. My mom wrote all those poems that so deeply captured my own darkness. The life I was supposed to have is just as screwed up as the one I do. My chest heaves. There is no picture-perfect family waiting for me out there, no beautiful Oregon lake where my mom is waiting, no life without the mental illness that has stalked me, no world where I was not going to hurt like this.

We stop at a red light. Looking up, I see Aunt Eliza and Aunt Alison talking. They are laughing and crying all at once. I wonder what it must be like to have so many answers and so many questions raised at once. They were screwed over from the beginning too, running from their own monsters, losing their best friend, slowly stumbling toward healing. Aunt Eliza's musical laugh fills the car as silver tears glisten on her face and suddenly the whole thing strikes me as miraculously beautiful.

Here I am, in my own imperfect world, sitting in a car with two people who dropped everything to fly to California just so that I could find the answers I so desperately wanted to find. As our car starts moving again, I gently touch the photo in my lap. Sixteen-year-old Chloe looks up at me, vibrant blue eyes framed by pale blonde hair. It's hard to imagine her cold and lifeless only one year later. I barely made it here into this world. I wish I could go back and tell her that life mattered, that life was beautiful in spite of all the hell that we go through. I think Eliza and Alison would have flown to California for her too. How poetic that they unknowingly cared for their best friend's daughter all these years.

"Hey Evelyn?" Aunt Eliza leans over the backseat.

I look up. "Yes?"

"What are you thinking about? I know it's a lot to process." Aunt Alison says, looking gently at me in her rearview mirror.

"Um..." The words stick in my throat. Later, I will ask them about her. I will listen to the funniest and happiest and saddest of their stories. I will go back and read Chloe's poems for the hundredth time. I will take deep breaths and stop fighting my mom about regularly seeing a therapist and, one day, I will finish college. But for right now, there really isn't anywhere else I'd like to be.

A tiny smile tugs at my face. "I think we're all really messed up."

Aunt Eliza laughs.

I gesture out to California and the world at large. "Probably a lot of them are too."

"Are you angry?" Aunt Alison asks. Her voice is gentle, so I know that it would be okay if I were angry.

But I smile. “No. Listen.” There is silence in the car. Outside, someone honks a horn, but inside all we can hear is each other breathing. “Isn’t it beautiful?”

*The end of all things is also a beginning and I hope*

*to one day see*

*the beauty in the*

*chaos.*

*~CAC, 2010*

## References

- Allen, S. (2018). *A kind of mirraculas paradise: a true story about schizophrenia*. New York, NY: Scribner
- American Psychiatric Association. (2013). *Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders* (5th ed.). Arlington, VA: American Psychiatric Publishing.
- Anderson, S. (1919) *Winesburg, Ohio*. New York, NY: B. W. Huebsch
- Anxiety and Depression Facts & Statistics. (2018). *Anxiety and Depression Association of America*. Retrieved from: <https://adaa.org/about-adaa/press-room/facts-statistics>
- Bailey, L. (2018). *Because we are bad: OCD and a girl lost in thought*. New York, NY: Harper Collins
- Bipolar Disorder. (2017). *National Insitute of Mental Health*. Retrieved from: <https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/statistics/bipolar-disorder.shtml>
- Causes of Schizophrenia. (2016). *National Health Service*. Retrieved from: <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/schizophrenia/causes/>
- Caspi, A., Vishne, R., Sasson, Y., Gross, R., Livne, A., & Zohar, J. (2008). Relationship between childhood sexual abuse and obsessive-compulsive disorder: case-control study. *Israel Journal of Psychiatry and Related Sciences*, 45(3), 177-182. Retrieved from: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/19398821>
- Cogle, J.R., Feldner, M.T., Keough, M.E., Hawkins, K.A., & Kitch, K.E. (2010). Comorbid panic attacks among individuals with posttraumatic stress disorder: associations with traumatic event exposure history, symptoms, and impairment. *Journal of Anxiety Disorders*, 24(2), 183-188. doi: 10.1016/j.janxdis.2009.10.006
- Egan, J. (2011) *A visit from the goon squad*. New York, NY: Anchor Books

- Foa, E.B., Gilliham, S. J., & Bryant, R. A. (2013) Challenges and Successes in Dissemination of Evidence-Based Treatments for Posttraumatic Stress: Lessons Learned from Prolonged Exposure Therapy for PTSD. *Psychological Science in the Public Interest*. Doi: 10.1177/1529100612468841
- Hoffman, A. (2005). *Blackbird House*. New York, NY: Ballantine Books
- Jamison, K.R. (1997). *An unquiet mind: a memoir of moods and madness*. New York, NY: Vintage Books.
- Kessler, R.C., Chiu, W.T., Demler, O., Merikangas, K.R. & Walters, E.E. (2005). Prevalence, severity, and comorbidity of 12-month DSM-IV disorders in the National Comorbidity Survey Replication. *Arch Gen Psychiatry* 62(6), 617-27
- Post- Traumatic Stress Disorder. (2017). *National Institute of Mental Health*. Retrieved from: <https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/statistics/post-traumatic-stress-disorder-ptsd.shtml>
- Kessler, R.C., Angermyer, M., Anthony, J.C., Graaf, R.D., Demyttenaere, K., Gasquet, I., ... Ustun, T.B. (2007). Lifetime prevalence and age-of-onset distributions of mental disorders in the World Health Organization's World Mental Health Survey Initiative. *World Psychiatry*, 6(3), 168-176
- Lai, H., Lu, J., & Sun F. (2017). Improve innovation ability of college students through interdisciplinary education and practice. *Advances in engineering research*. doi:10.2991/icadme-16.2016.93
- Marra, A. (2016). *The tsar of love and techno*. New York, NY: Hogarth.
- Merkin, D. (2017). *This close to happy: a reckoning with depression*. New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux
- Mun, N. (2009). *Miles from nowhere*. New York, NY: Riverhead Books

- Newell, W. H. (2010). Educating for a Complex World: Integrative Learning and Interdisciplinary Studies. *Liberal Education*, 90(4)
- O'Brien, T. (1990). *The Things They Carried*. New York, NY: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing
- Riddle, M.A. (1998). Obsessive-compulsive disorder in children and adolescents. *Neuroscience Educational Institute*, 51(3), 21-23
- Schizophrenia. (2018). *National Institute of Mental Health*. Retrieved from:  
<https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/statistics/schizophrenia.shtml>
- Simpson, H.B., Foa, E.B., & Liebowitz, M.R. (2013). Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy vs Risperidone for Augmenting Serotonin Reuptake Inhibitors in Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder: A Randomized Clinical Trial. *JAMA Psychiatry*. doi:  
10.1001/jamapsychiatry.2013.1932
- Sue, D., Sue, D.W., Sue, D., & Sue, S. (2016). Understanding abnormal behavior. Boston, MA: Cengage Learning
- Suicide Statistics. (2017). *American Foundation for Suicide Prevention*. Retrieved from:  
<https://afsp.org/about-suicide/suicide-statistics/>
- Treffert, D. A. (2013). Savant Syndrome – Myths and Realities. *Wisconsin Medical Society*. Retrieved from: <https://www.wisconsinmedicalsociety.org/professional>
- Turkington, D., Kingdon, D., & Weiden, P.J. (2006). Cognitive Behavioral Therapy for Schizophrenia. *American Journal of Psychiatry*, 163(3), 365-373. doi:  
10.1176/appi.ajp.163.3.365