Theory

Of

Reality

By:

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**Explanation**

Before this even starts, I should let you know that I am only telling this story because you wanted it. I don’t want your pity, but don’t tease me either.

I’ve come to realize that I am who I am only because of what others have done to me. If I never experienced what I did, I might not be who I am now, and that actually scares me. I also have grown up being bullied, so I’ve found that I expect it. It’s a love-hate relationship.

I’ve noticed that when a day goes by without being teased as intensely as usual, I actually start to worry and get panic attacks. I should also let you all know that I’m addicted to pain. Any kind. I’m not emo or anything like that, though; I’m just a masochist.

Obviously, I still have that human instinct to not physically react well to pain, but it fills me with this feeling that I can’t describe. It’s not “good” per se, but it is a feeling I thrive on. Some things that you discover you might not believe, but it’s all real. I will only talk about 7th grade because it is the year that I started thinking like I do now.

Before that time, I was wearing mostly black, being almost entirely anti-social, always depressed or putting on a stony face. I haven’t had some magical TV transformation, but I’m a bit more social and open. A bit. Odd thing, though, I’m so involved in after-school clubs. I even participate in Martial Arts. I always have. Has that improved my social life? No. I’ve always had good grades, too, and I don’t tell people about my experiences. I always thought that nobody would care anyway, but you did. So here. The story of how I learned from pain.

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I am here telling my side of this story. I am not depressed and haven’t ever been. That doesn’t mean, however, that I don’t have my own issues, and that I don’t know pain. I know pain a whole lot better than most.

I don’t remember a lot of my pain, which many consider to be a good thing. However, I wonder if remembering would help me make better decisions in life, or if they would at least give me some sort of wisdom. I wonder how I’d be different if I did remember. It kinda scares me sometimes.

As much as I want to remember, part of me says that sometimes things are better off not being known. From what I’ve been told, that may be true. Perhaps I’d have worse mental issues if I remembered; that would interfere greatly with my life.

Before I moved here for middle school, I was always that kid with the “Thing”. The kid who couldn’t do PE, or recess, really. I was everyone’s little Michael. I had to act and be a certain way. Anything deviating from what was expected of me was coddled to death. I “didn’t have to work yourself so hard” and it was “ok if you don’t make friends quickly”. The thing they didn’t get, though, was that I wanted to. I didn’t want to be some kid on the sidelines. The kid who couldn’t do anything. Now, though, I can be who I really am. Sure, I’m not the best student, but I work hard for good grades. I’m also more confident in my own skin. Sometimes it was weird, though, to think that everyone knew my pain except for me. So here’s the story of how I learned from pain.

**1**

Monday. 1st day of 7th grade. Time to see everybody I haven’t seen in 11 weeks. I have on my normal outfit: jeans, a t-shirt, my favorite black jacket, my fingerless gloves, and my black Converse. My hair is its usual shoulder-length brown. I don’t like having my hair this long, but I haven’t been able to get it cut in a while. Not that I’m allowed to have it above my ears. Thanks, Mom.

I get onto the old, yellow school bus and sit in my normal seat in the second-to-last row. Probably a poor decision on my part because then people can torture me from side, front, AND behind, but it’s my spot. I’ve always sat there. Every day since the first day of 6th grade. I guess I’m perpetuating my own problem there. I’m the first on my bus, so I always wait for the other kids to come on. After a few stops and people, one of the kids comes on and sits behind me. Robert James Kurt. He is a bit large in the belly and has so many zits. I pretend not to notice him, but he knows that I did.

“Hey, long time no see huh, Emoly? Still wearing those dumb gloves?” Ya, Emoly. Emo Emily. He invented that last May. So creative.

“May I help you?” I reply.

“Aww, come on, I’m not a total stranger just because we haven’t seen each other for 11 weeks.”

He pulls my hood of my zipped-up jacket back and down towards his seat, hard, and it almost is choking me. It is definitely not comfortable. I try to unzip my jacket, but of course the zipper gets stuck.

“How could you forget stuff like this?” Robert asks.

I can’t answer. I keep trying with my jacket, but it is futile. All it’s doing is scratching the zipper against my neck. My face is starting to feel puffy. The bus finally makes an abrupt stop, and my hood returns to me as I can finally breathe correctly. I also slightly unzip the jacket to the right amount so that Robert can’t pull it and choke me again.

I just sit there because I know better than to take something out of my backpack. I flinch away when a body comes and sits right next to me. Right. Corey and Zari come on the bus at this stop, and they’ve gotten right beside me. Corey is right next to me, his breath stinks, and Zari has himself right in front of me. Corey and Zari are twins. Both blonde, muscular, and cruel.

“Hey, heeeey, Emily!” Corey and Zari say together in the same mocking tone.

“Oh, your face is all red, and you’re panting like a dog,” says Corey.

“Get. Away.” I growl between my teeth. Not a good idea, I realize.

“Oh, she IS a dog. Growlin’ like that,” Zari says.

“Hey, Corey,” Robert chimes in, “Do what she says.”

I wonder why he said that. Then I know. C’mon, Emily, Classic #3.

“Just sit next to me instead,” he adds, to my expectance and anger. Knew it. Classic #3. Now both Robert AND Corey are behind me. My body is on high alert, and I can feel adrenaline pumping. My chest gets that tiny pulse of pain that it does at certain times. I can’t really explain the criteria, but I know when it will happen. I even make myself do it sometimes.

After a bit, I start freaking out because they haven’t done anything yet. *Just hurry up,* I think, *Just choke me to death or whatever you plan on doing.* I even notice that I zip my jacket up. I end up getting so anxious that I get into a fetal position just so they do something. They do.

“Awww, Emoly, what’s wrong?” Robert asks mockingly, “upset that nobody likes you? Are you gonna cry and cut yourself in the bathroom when we get to school?”

Ew. No. I’m not some girly-girl who would do that for attention.

“Ya, EMOLY,” Corey adds, “Gonna cut your wrist and FINALLY die of blood loss? It would do us all a favor.”

I sigh and keep looking forward, getting my breath back and basking in That Feeling.

I’m exhausted. I just went through the whole school day, and nobody would leave me alone. Good thing Robert’s stupid; he’s only in my non-honors classes. Corey and Zari, though, and some others are in my honors classes. New teachers, though, despite popular opinion, don’t watch the kids any more closely on the first day of school. They just look at them once and assume things from there, so people were able to still torture me. Lunch was even stressful; the line took so long to get through that lunch ended before I got it. At least I didn’t have to worry about a seat.

I decide to walk around the building after school while I wait for my mom. I should be safe since Robert, Corey, and Zari probably take the bus home, like they did last year. They’re the only ones that physically attack me. Everything else is more or less verbal, so I can deal with it on some level. Then I realize how much my thoughts sound like one of those movie characters before something bad happens to them, and I don’t feel as safe. That’s Classic #5.

I head quickly to the back of the school, so they won’t find me if they’re here. I sit against the wall and try to relax. I take off my backpack and throw it in front of me so I leans on my legs. It soon falls over on its own into the grass. I sit and think about the day and sort through thoughts while I still can.

A hand comes from around the corner and plugs my nose. Then a body follows that hand. The second hand smashes itself to my mouth, the body planting itself to my side.  
 “Are you still not dead?” Oh, no. Robert. Classic #5; I knew it. Two new guys are with him, and they stand in front of me. The one on the left is tall with blue hair and is in preppy clothes, and the one on the right is tall with black hair and purposely torn clothes. After I process that, I can’t think clearly.

My heart is beating out of my chest; my lungs are frantic for air. My stomach is going in and out. My mouth bubbles up. When I try to breathe with my mouth, I only get Robert’s sweaty palm. Licking his hand doesn’t work. I can’t move my head, either. I try to reach for Robert’s arms and push them away, but they just get tighter. I try to shove Robert away, but my arms are too short to reach him as he moved all the way back. I kick, but then the two other guys pin down my legs harshly. I keep trying to fight, making horrid noises that I can’t control as my body goes into instinctual overdrive. My fists clench the grass beneath me.

“Awwwwww,” Robert remarks mockingly, “She’s trying to get free. How cute. ” I can’t really hear him anymore, nor can I see him clearly. That Feeling comes, ready for me to embrace it, but my instincts mask it. I bring my arm up to try to reach him again, trying to keep my eyes open. I can barely pick it up; it slowly goes up to him and helplessly grabs at nothing.

2

“Hello, Michael! Hope you enjoyed your first day!” Mom was as enthusiastic as ever as I threw my backpack in the backseat of the car before jumping into the passenger seat.

“I did,” I replied, “My teachers are all pretty great, and the classes seem fun.”

“Oh, speaking of which,” Mom remembered, “Did you give your gym teacher the doctor’s note?” Oh. I’d forgotten. The teachers had talked the whole period, and I didn’t get the chance. Mom tells me to go give it to her now before we leave. I get out of the air-conditioned car, not fond of the outside heat wave, and I feel lucky that I remember where the back door to the gym is. I decide to go around the back of the school since it is faster than going around the other way. I also want to know what the back looks like anyway.

I cross the street that goes behind the school so I can see it from a distance. The center is a grassy area with giant, noisy machines surrounded on three sides by walls in the back and sides. Seems like a nice niche; someone could easily hide here. I’m surprised I don’t see any random druggies or thugs hanging about, but I guess I’m kinda relieved as well. The smoke would really bother my lungs. That would be the last thing I need here.

I go around the back to the gym door on the other side of the school, and the coach happens to be standing in the field outside of the door. She looks over at me and asks what’s up. I go up to her and show her my note. She reads it over.

“So, you can’t do many activities? Don’t worry; you’re not the only one. There’s another kid in your period who can’t participate, either. He’s a seventh grader. I think his name’s Trevor. Yeah, Trevor Kenji. He’s got a heart condition. You can play a few things according to this note, but if you don’t feel comfortable participating in what we’re doing, don’t feel obligated to play. We do have rigorous activities.”

“Ok, thank you,” I said, relieved that she isn’t some drill sergeant that would tell me to participate, “See you tomorrow!”

“Sure thing, Michael. Hey, do you prefer Mike?” I look at her and catch myself before I said no. Here nobody knows me; I don’t have to keep being Michael anymore. I don’t want to be Mike either, though. Too close. Cole. The second syllable. Yes, I’d be Cole.

“Actually, I prefer Cole,” I reply.

“Alright, Cole, see you tomorrow!”

She waves me off, and I go back around the way I came. However, this time I do see someone in the grass by the machines. It’s a girl in a black jacket. She’s hugging her backpack, coughing and gasping pretty hard. I’m about to cross the street and go to her, to ask if she’s ok, but then I hear my mom honk. She can see me from where I am. I listen to the coughs as I walk slowly on, and they get less severe, eventually becoming just throat clearings. She’s ok, then. I walk at a normal pace.

The whole way home the coughing bothers me; it was not normal. It wasn’t an asthma attack, I would know, so at first I had thought that it was an anxiety attack. That hadn’t seemed right. Had she been choking and coughed something back up? No. I hadn’t seen her with food or wrappers, either. That leaves one idea that refuses to leave my head; she’d just been choked. Had a person choked her? Had she choked herself? There is something about her I can’t quite pinpoint, and I feel obligated to know what it is.

3

“So, anything happen at school, Emily?” my mom asks.

“No, nothing other than normal first day stuff.” My mouth feels dry and metallic; I hope it doesn’t show in my voice.

“Did you tell any of your teachers that you were that transgender crap? I don’t need that this year.”

“No,” I replied with minimal tension. I had told my mom last school year that I was transgender to see if I could go as a boy in middle school. Ever since then, she’s like a whole different mother. She basically ignores me.

For example, I haven’t been out to shop for myself since then. When I ask, she just dismisses it and keeps on doing her business. My clothes, decorations, music, books, and even school supplies are from 5th grade and earlier or, in the case of school supplies, borrowed from others last year. Good thing I haven’t grown, so my old clothes still fit fine. I have to feed myself at dinner; she never makes anything for me or the both of us. I don’t even get a say in what my mom buys, and she gets mad if I use a stove or oven. So it’s just fruit, boxed foods, and microwave food for me.

I have Lean Cuisine microwaveable cheese ravioli tonight with a glass of milk and day-old strawberries. The combination of flavors wasn’t ideal. Now I know. I then give my mom all the forms she has to sign for school.

“Ugh, all these forms. You’re just so needy, aren’t you? Do I HAVE to sign them? Fine.” She half-heartedly signs them without reading them. At least she did sign them; she got in trouble when she didn’t last year. That was not a fun time.

I go to bed at around ten and think about everything. Robert had choked me twice today, and one of those times I almost passed out. Was this becoming a new norm? Did Robert decide that choking me was better than beating me up? He didn’t even choke me in a conventional way by squeezing my neck. What if he killed me? I am really scared now. I feel violated, too, in a way. It takes me an hour to fall asleep.

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My mom refuses to drive me to school since I had no good reasons, and I take the bus again this morning. I look out the window as we go down the normal route, waiting in agony for Robert and his shenanigans.

“Hey, Emoly!” Robert greets me with a wicked grin. He then does something unusual; he plops himself right next to me. I try to scoot to the side and kick at him, but he reaches around my head before I get to kicking him. He now has me in a head lock, nice and low so the bus driver can’t see from her mirror. He squeezes, and I can’t move his arm. He’s too strong. I can’t throw him over my shoulder, either; the seat in front is in the way.

At the next stop, he lets me go, and I fall into the leg space in between my seat and the next. Corey and Zari laugh with Robert as they sit across the aisle from me. They throw taunts, but I barely register them and just allow my blood flow to return to normal. I get back into my seat and cradle the arm I fell on.

I enter school and head to the normal waiting area for the 7th graders, which is the cafetorium right in the center of the school. I get stares no matter where I look to sit, so I sit alone on some of the steps and look at what’s around me. I have a book with me, but it would get stolen and thrown if I took it out here. Every so often a jock passes by and pretends to be friendly, laughing to his friends immediately after, or someone slaps me as they pass by, also laughing after a taunt.

I see many kinds of people as I look around; some I know, some I don’t. Some are pretty generic-looking, like the girly-girls and the jocks; some are nerds, rockers of all types, artists, weeaboos (those are the anime lovers who bring stuffed animals to school), hipsters, LGBT kids, and other non-conformists or people who belong to multiple groups. I somehow don’t fit in with any of them, even though I like rock, anime, am a nerd, and I’m transgender. I’ve tried, but they always end up excluding me. So here I sit, alone, and for now I’m ok with that.

I have PE today 3rd period, and I want to sit out because my mouth and throat are sore. I have an alternate excuse and everything. However, I will not be seen as some average girly-girl that doesn’t participate in sports. That part of me overwhelms my physical issues as I am the only girl to actively play kickball. During PE, the coaches are always watching, so I don’t get outright bullied here. I only get whispers from people behind me and on the sidelines, which I’m fine with.

The coach tries to talk to me at the end of class, and she insists again that I join a sports team. She tried having me do it last year, too. I refuse, as usual. First of all, I don’t want to be on a girls’ team, and second, the girls on those teams are like stereotypical cheerleaders. They’re very bitchy, and they don’t like me AT ALL. Funny thing is, they don’t even participate in regular PE. Even in the locker room, they see me and make snide remarks, often with quick charades. They’re just super annoying. I’m not even big on volleyball or basketball, anyway. I do like running, but I wouldn’t want to sacrifice other activities for it. Now that I think about it, my mom probably wouldn’t even spend evenings taking me to meets or practice. So there.

Robert seems to have my schedule figured out because he keeps passing me in the hallway and shouldering me (forcefully and painfully) into lockers, doors, walls, and corners. Nobody else ever notices because he does it so discreetly that it just makes me look clumsy, which doesn’t help things. I just hope he doesn’t choke me again today, but I have my doubts. Luckily I don’t run into him on the way to lunch. Whoever decided I should eat after pe is great.

**4**

I say bye to my mom and step out of the car. After I enter the school, I immediately look for the girl from yesterday. I see her go to Ms. Pasvar’s Spanish class, and I realize she’s a 7th grader. That explains why she’s not in any of my main classes. She could be in my PE class, though. Those classes are huge; I wouldn’t have remembered her.

My 2nd period English teacher, Mrs. Rowan, talks to me after class. I guess she was told about my writing contests. I was in them for years and won quite a bit, but I quit about 2 or 3 years ago since it got so competitive and political. The expectations for the level of writing also rose, and I hadn’t liked that.

“You know, Cole” Ms. Rowan tells me, “I’ve read some of your old work, and I’ve also read through your personality questionnaire that I gave out yesterday. Even in casual writing you have a natural voice. Your vocabulary, punctuation use, syntax, sentence structure, all of it is unique and high-level. Have you considered doing writing contests again? I think you’d do very well.”

“Why, thank you,” I answered, off-guard, “But I don’t like writing contests anymore. They’re so…, well, you have to be well-known or fit into some ‘master’ criteria to win. I don’t like that.” I sounded far more confident than I felt.

To my surprise, Mrs. Rowan smiled. “I like that mindset,” she continued, “You just want to make honest, original stories. I understand. Perhaps you’d consider publishing a story to some sort of publication, like a magazine? There are also many websites where you could publish them, but they won’t get as much publicity. You could even publish a physical novel. There are no limits. I don’t mean to pressure you, but you have so much talent as a writer. If you made a deep, thought-provoking story, it would definitely grab attention. I’d like to see your potential used to help the world in some way.”

I look at Mrs. Rowan. She seems sincere, and my next period starts soon. Luckily this is her off-period, so nobody else sees me here. “I’ll think about it,” I say, “But if you look, my stories aren’t very deep. They’re just fluff. I don’t have much deep stuff to write about. I’ve had a pretty good life.”

She looks at me weird. “Now, I’m not saying to become a pessimist,” she warns, “But look realistically at yourself. I’m sure you have some deep emotions. Everyone does. Some more than others, but try to explore yourself. It seems you’ve been doing that already, though, since you decided to go by Cole now. Just don’t let your emotions sit and rot. Express them in writing. That’s how some of the best stories are made, and you’ll feel better than you already do. Just let me know when you decide on anything, ok?”

“Ok,” I agree with a small smile. She fills out a hall pass for me and lets me off with a wave and a return smile. I head over to the gym for PE. I realize as I’m walking why the teacher looked at me weirdly when I said I had a good life. To her, I’ve had (and still have) bad lung issues, and I don’t have a dad. Well, that’s what I always say. I’m a bastard child, and my dad left my mom early in my life. It’s just always been easier to say I don’t have one. I also just moved away from what I’ve always known. That, however, is more of a relief for me. Have I been suppressing deep emotions about those things all these years, only acting like it didn’t bother me? I would think about that another time.

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I get to PE late, obviously. I give the coach my pass, and she nods. I take my seat in the bleachers. I head to the top row so I can see everyone. I also don’t want to be next to the girls standing and chatting at the bottom; they seem pretty gossipy. I don’t want to get involved in that if I don’t have to.

Everyone’s playing kickball. Of course; it’s a classic PE game. I look for that girl from earlier, and I see her brown hair as she gets ready to kick. She seems better than this morning. She kicks super well and scores a grand slam. She runs really fast around the bases, too. She looked so focused on the game. She acts so cool and calm after running. She just goes and takes her place in the back of the batting line. Nobody high-fives her or anything, which I think is kinda odd since they do that with everyone else when they even make it two bases.

The teams soon switch, and the girl has herself in just the right spot so she fills a final gap in the infield. She plays very well and is actively involved, but gets no praise, not even when she catches the ball and gets people out. Then I realize she’s also the only girl playing. All the other girls are at the bleachers. I see why her and the girly girls wouldn’t get along, but I still wonder why she is only with boys. Maybe she’s just a tomboy. She is wearing basketball shorts as her PE shorts. The other girls are in sport shorts or Spandex.

“Got your eye on that girl?” a voice whispers, almost making me jump out of my skin.

“What? No, I’m just watching the game,” I insist. The boy who whispered to me looks at me, unconvinced, from under his red hair, which had fallen in front of his face. He’s wearing an old band t-shirt with a denim vest covered in pins and patches. He also has straps attached to his pants. He basically looks like a punk kid without a Mohawk or piercings. He’s kinda scary-looking, but there’s also an innocence to it.

“Sure you are,” he teased, “What’s your name, kid? I’m Trevor, the Asian punk. You must be the other kid who gets to skip PE.”

I nod and shake his hand, “I’m Cole. Nice to meet you, Trevor. Asian punk?”

“Oh, I like the manners. Yeah, it’s not every day you see some Asian punk, right? It’s normally white kids. Hence the name. Now, Cole, I am a seventh grader, as is that girl. Her name’s Emily. She doesn’t have too many friends, if any. Everyone in 7th grade thinks that she’s super weird. It’s been like that since last year even. I wouldn’t know, though; I don’t know her personally. She prefers to be alone, and I don’t ever have her in my classes. She seems like she could be cool, though.”

“I told you, it’s not about the girl.”

“Then why’d you listen intently to everything I told you about her? If it really didn’t matter, you’d ignore or interrupt me.”

I looked at him, impressed. He was good, but I wasn’t about to tell him that he was right. He probably knew it, anyway.

“If you want to talk to her, though,” Trevor continues, “She seems very closed off. I wouldn’t recommend it. Especially not out of the blue. Tread cautiously. I’ve heard some rumors about her.”

“Oh?” I pry, regretting it immediately. I don’t want to participate in gossip, especially rumors. I look down a bit.

Trevor sees my regret, nods, and doesn’t elaborate. We then talk a bit about our medical conditions. Trevor’s heart condition used to be far worse than it is now; he’d spent a lot of time in the hospital in early elementary school. He doesn’t look frail, though. Sure, he’s a bit skinnier than most, but it’s not something very noticeable unless you’re looking for it. He then inevitably talks about music. He’s into punk, metal, and and some grunge. Basically heavy rock, from what I can decipher. I now have some bands to look up this weekend. Normally I wouldn’t do so; I’m not very interested in music. Mrs. Rowan, though, really got me thinking about emotions, and music, especially rock, is full of deep emotion.

**5**

Ugh, the lunch line. Stupid boys jumping the hand rail and play-fighting each other in such a small space. I’m not the only one getting smashed into the wall by their antics. My elbow’s gonna be bruised. At this point nobody tries to stop it anymore. It takes almost 15 of the 30 allotted lunch minutes to get through the line. The lines are very inefficient, and there are a lot of hungry kids to get through.

When I finally get through, I go across a hall into the cafetorium. I have no idea where to go. I would sit alone, but the counselor would see me and try to talk to me. I can’t sit with people, either. What did I do last year? I can’t really remember. I know that the first semester I sat with two different groups, and each one would verbally, photographically, and sometimes physically harass me. I had only sat with them because one of the members claimed to like me. So much for that. I remember one time that I had left my gloves at the table once by accident when I went to go to the bathroom, and when I came back they were soaked in tomato sauce and who knows what else. I spent the rest of that lunch period washing them, and I had to keep the wet gloves and my bare hands in my jacket pockets the rest of the day. I haven’t been able to wear those gloves again; they’re too stained.

I realize I’m just standing in the hall and walk to the trash to dump my tray. It’s a big waste of food, but I’m no longer hungry. It’s not like I can give it to some starving African child; would if I could. I head over to the bathroom since I don’t know where else to go to think. I enter and am disappointed to see Cher and Zeriash standing by the sinks. They look over to me. Cher pretends to hurl and Zeriash holds her neck and fakes choking. Before I can give them a disgusted look, Zeriash says, “Oh, sorry, you’re just so disgusting that seeing you just made us want to kill ourselves.” With a sickly grin on her face. She and Cher laugh and walk past me to leave, shoving me to the side and continuing to comment on their “hilarious” act. Ugh, I hit my elbow again. It seems like it’ll bruise. I go into a stall and sit on the toilet, hunching over so my arms rest on my legs. While there I can finally think.

I can’t eat lunch in the bathroom. That much is obvious. Lunch is when girls go to the restroom together; I’d be easily seen and even more harassed in a room where I can’t escape. I also finally have enough self-respect nowadays to not put myself in that position. I’m technically not allowed to go to the library for lunch, but I wonder if I can sneak up there. The librarian wouldn’t care, and teachers are so focused on the lunch line anyway. I could try that now.

I walk out of the bathroom, passing more girls at the sinks who go silent as I walk by, probably surprised that I was there the whole time. I head to the stairs and quietly go up, looking back to see if any teachers notice me. Nope. The library is down the hall and to the right, and I enter. The door is louder than I expect, so I hold it and try to close it as quietly as possible since the school has a huge echo. I look to the desk to the right and see that he librarian is in his office, and he’s attached to his computer.

I look forwards towards to tables, and someone else is there. He’s in my grade, but I don’t think I’ve had him for any classes. I think his name’s Trent or Tarian or something. His hair’s red now; it was blue last year. His left side is still shaved, though, and he looks as much like an old-school punk as ever. It’s a good look for him. He looks up at me, surprised, and then goes back to his book after a polite two-finger wave. He seems cool, but I’m done trying to make friends. I sit a few tables down from him and read my book. For once I feel relaxed. The noise of the cafeteria is minimal, the boy doesn’t bother me the entire time, and I am able to read in peace. I decide this was how I would spend my lunch periods.

I head over to Algebra since lunch ends soon after I go to the library. I’m a grade ahead in math, so everyone else in the class is an 8th grader. As one may figure out, that doesn’t go well for me. I get the information quicker than a lot of them, too, as proven in the math games we played yesterday, and many of their egos shrivel when they see what I do and know.

In algebra, we sit in tables of four so we can “collaborate” on work. My table has decent people in it. Roopika sits next to me, and she’s fine with me being in the class. She’s smart, too. She doesn’t give me too many problems. Kayden sits across from me, and he gives off obvious signals that he doesn’t like me. It’s fine, though; his ego does need a kick in the ass. The glares are distracting, though, as are his passive-aggressive statements. The person diagonal from me is named Sylvia. She just reads the whole time. I don’t think she actually does any work.

Today, since it’s only the second day of school, we start with learning about the basics of variables. Mr. Sylvestro teaches us how to solve a simple equation and also goes over some terminology. Whenever he asks a question, I raise my hand, and Kayden takes notice along with others at other tables. Mr. Sylvestro doesn’t seem to care, though; he calls on me regardless. I eventually stop putting my hand up, but it’s hard to resist when he asks an advanced question. Nobody else knows it, so I nervously raise my hand. He calls on me. I get it right. The kid behind me, Jack, just has to comment, “Well, SOMEONE’S smart.”

“I hope for the future of this planet and this species that it’s not you.”

Oh, crud. I didn’t mean to say that. It just came out. Everyone laughs and yells “Oooh, she got you!” I hope this Jack kid doesn’t decide to “take matters into his own hands” later. Apparently Jack’s always been like this, and I just roasted him. Felt good, actually, but it still makes me nervous. Jack’s glare isn’t helping. Luckily Mr. Silvestro calms everyone down without telling either of us to see him after class.

**6**

Lunch had been nice; I had sat with Andrew, a kid from my English class, like I had yesterday. Andrew was a bit nerdy, but not enough to have social repercussions from it. He was popular, actually. There was another kid who hung out with Andrew, too, named Robert. Robert was a 7th grader, and he was a pretty big kid; one would not want to get in a fight with him. Their table had about 13 people. Some did dumb things all of lunch, but others talked to me and discussed classes, teachers, etc. Robert had been able to give a lot of insight. However, it was clouded by his belief that all teachers were lame, which was kinda funny.

When I go to grab another drink from the line, though, I hear two girls laughing as they came out of the bathroom. I can’t help but overhear them. They are talking about Emily, that girl.

“Oh my god, that was great,” one of them says, “Did you see her face? It was so funny.”

“Yeah,” the other one replies, “So worth it. She really is disgusting, though, oh my gosh.”

They both laugh again and get out of earshot. So Emily is bullied. What did they do to her just now? It sounds like they just pranked her or something. Regardless, they just said super rude things. It takes all my effort not to run over and slap those girls.

After lunch I have theatre, which is quickly becoming my favorite class of the day. Yesterday we’d done a ton of active icebreaker games that involved impersonations, charades, dances, and singing. It was so fun. Today we already start discussing the fall play, which is going to be a musical. A short musical version of a play I’d never heard of called Hameln’s Trite. I knew the story of the Pied Piper of Hameln, but I hadn’t known there was a play about it somewhere.

This version told a story where the Pied Piper was paid by the mayor to get rid of the rats that were giving the city disease. He managed to get all of them into the Weser River, where they were away from the town, except for one. The mayor refused to pay until the last rat was gone and didn’t acknowledge the piper’s success at all. The Piper then decided to lure the children of the town away as revenge and took them to Kopparberg Hill. Three were left behind; one who was too slow to keep up, one who was deaf and didn’t hear the music, and one who was blind and didn’t know where to go. They told the adults after the adults got back from a town meeting. The Piper gave the children back after the townspeople paid him.

Well, they went with the most school-appropriate version; even I found it a bit too censored. From what I’ve read, the Piper drowned those rats in the river. Not sure how that’s so bad. All the stories I’ve read, too, call the slow child the “lame” child. I guess they can’t say that anymore, though. The Piper also didn’t give the kids back in the versions I knew…but I guess that’s too macabre?

“Bro, what a pedophile,” a girl next to me comments, I think her name is Anna. The teacher, Ms. Castiel, left to use the bathroom, so everyone is free to talk about the play.

“I know, right?” another girl next to her replies, I think she’s Raina, “He probably raped them all before he gave them back.”

Woah, that escalated quickly. I’d heard that is an actual theory, though, as disturbing as it is. However, the other theories are, in their own ways, just as dark.

“Really?”

Oh darn. I said that out loud.

Now everyone was looking at me.

“Yeah,” I continued, once again more confident than I sounded, “Actually, the Piper drowns the rats in the Weser River in most versions. Other versions of the story tell that the Piper had drowned the kids just like he had with the rats. The rat part of the story, though, seemed to come in a few hundred years after the original event, so the actual event in Hameln most likely doesn’t involve rats. Some theories, besides the pedophile one, are that the kids died of natural causes such as drowning, disease, or a landslide, and the Piper was like a grim reaper. Some even say Pagans lured the children to the woods, where they died in a landslide or sink hole during a ritual dance, and the Piper was a Pagan recruiter.”- I stop, wondering if I’m talking too much, but everyone seems interested-, “Some also say that they all left of their own accord for a pilgrimage or to join a Children’s Crusade, which is itself a story-myth like this, or that the parents sold the kids to Baltic Europe since they were so poor.”

“Wait,” Anna interjects, “The story is real? Like, those kids actually disappeared?”

“Evidence says so,” I replied, “The first known depiction of it was on a stained-glass window in the city of Hamelin, but it got destroyed in a fire in 1660. The next oldest text is from the 1400’s. Whether or not Hameln represents an actual person or not in unknown, but there was a large emigration of some sort. One theory states that the kids are just residents who migrated to Transylvania themselves, not necessarily just kids. No one knows for sure.”

Ms. Castiel comes back in, and we all sit back down in or seats. Man, why did I say all that? They seemed interested, but they probably just think that I’m some weirdo now. I was just saying that stuff; I couldn’t control it. I’m not even sure when I learned all of it. Ms. Castiel asks if anyone knows the story of Hameln, and everyone stares at me. Anna even calls me out to Ms. Castiel, and again I’m talking about Hameln theories and history. Again I’m coming out super confident. What is this feeling? It’s like some subconscious force takes over, making me appear confident. I guess it’s good for now.

After class, Anna catches up to me and asks how I knew about all the Hameln stuff.

“Well,” I answer, confidently again, “My dad used to tell me stories like that, and when I got older we’d discuss theories and variations of stories. Hameln seemed to really interest him.”

Crap. I used past tense. I even said that automatically; was that true? Yeah, I have a vague memory, I think…luckily Anna just says “cool” and walks on her way. I just start to realize the giant gap in my memory when it comes to my dad. I’d never thought about it before. Hm. I look up and see Trevor against the wall. He’s obviously caught on to my usage of past tense by the look of slight curiosity and pity on his face.

He smirks when he sees me, covering the pity. “What’s up? Seems you’re making friends; that’s good.”

“Well, I don’t know about that…I just happened to know things that they thought were interesting.”

“It’s a step in the right direction, isn’t it? Assuming you want friends.”

“I guess so.”

“You guess it’s a step, or you guess you want friends?”

“No, I want friends. Not ten million, but a good amount. A small group of good friends.”

“That’s good. Ten million fake friends can’t make up for one real one. Keep that in mind.”

“I know; Thanks.”

He nudges my shoulder as I start to leave; I look back. He looks at me with a face that looks cold but also soft, like a harsh snowflake.

“If you ever want to talk about dad issues, or anything for that matter, let me know. You’ve just moved to this school and this town. We’re cool now. I’m willing to listen and give advice; you don’t have to do the whole ‘real men don’t feel and real men don’t cry’ bullshit. I can relate, too. I know what it’s like to lose a parent.”

“You have dad issues, too?”

“A bit, but I haven’t lost my dad. I lost my mom.”

I look at him, speechless. If I’d lost my mom…all I can muster is an “oh”. I guess it always seems worse to lose a mom than a dad.

“Yeah,” he continues, “So if you ever want to talk, ask advice, or get something off your chest, I’m here for you, man. Don’t keep your emotions bottled up inside you; this world has enough robot puppets. I’m just letting you know now because I’ve been too late to tell before. Just don’t get too mushy, ok?”

He nudges my shoulder again and heads the other way, looking back with a rock hand symbol and a cool smirk before facing forward. Hm, Ms. Rowan had talked about that, too. Not keeping emotions inside. I guess Trevor cares about me, which is surprising considering we’ve only known each other for two days. Why does everyone think I’m supposed to have deep emotions, though? Does everyone know my emotions except for me?

**7**

Oh, thank god. I manage to make it into my mom’s car without Robert and co. finding me. No more choking today; I’m safe from that.

“And WHY did I have to pick you up again?” asks my mom, not holding back any crankiness.

“It was the introductory Journalism meeting,” I reply calmly, “I had to be there as one of the editors.” She sighs and drives on. *You don’t have to be that rude*, I think to myself. I’ve had that thought many times.

The Journalism meeting had been ok, I guess. There weren’t very many members this year, but some good ideas were thrown out for the paper and a new advice column done by two 6th grade girls. The club wants all of us to recruit new members; I guess we’ll have to make posters and put them on the walls at school. That’ll be fun; it also gives me an excuse to stay after school.

The school is very calm after it ends. Walking through the halls after school is almost relaxing, if I could relax. Just the tap of your own shoes on the tile, the lack of other people, the eerie silence; it’s just nice for a change. I bask in it every time I leave a club or if I’m staying after school just because. It’s one thing that’s prevented me from absolutely hating the school.

I get snapped back to reality as my mom stops in front of our house. I get out of the car with my backpack and head straight to my room to work on homework. I finish Algebra homework easily, as well as with science. It’s just answering questions. Mrs. Pasvar, the Spanish teacher, wants us to vocally practice Spanish at least 15 minutes every day, but I can’t do that with my mom. Even if I do it alone, she’ll yell that I’m making too much noise. I just write something down on the log and get that over with.

Bored, I start thinking about tomorrow. When I’m on the bus, what will Robert do? He seems to be going for something different each time. His fascination with choking is creepy, though. Is this how it works now? What if he kills me? Wait, would that really be so bad? What would I miss, really? I’m thinking too much, but obviously I can’t just stop. Tonight is not the night to go through all those thoughts, so I go to bed early to silence them.

I say bye to my mom as she leaves for work, and I spend the two hours I have alone before I leave for the bus breathing and listening to music. Today it’s a mix of punk, ska, and heavy metal music, which is the usual. The Dead Reagans, Operation Oak, Shinelow, Metallia, Destroying Daniel, Streetlamp Manifest, Sick AM, and more bands flood my room as I sing along to my heart’s desire. When it comes time to get to the bus stop, adrenaline is running through me, which makes my nerves worse but also pumps me up.

I get on the bus and go into my normal seat. Soon we get to Robert’s stop, and he sits in the row behind me. He says and does nothing. After a few seconds, I hesitantly look back at him. He has a serial killer-style grin on his face. He chuckles as he sees my face. I give him a look and sit back into my seat. So he’s messing with me. What is he planning? Whatever it is, he must’ve told Corey and Zari, because they both sit in front of me without saying anything. This isn’t good; I’m trapped.

When the bus stops in front of the school, Corey and Zari exit before me, blocking me from passing them in the aisle. Robert walks behind me and grabs my wrist, pushing me along. Shit. Corey and Zari continue to walk in front of me as I’m pushed to the tennis courts in the middle of the field at school. The courts are enclosed in a wire fence surrounded by tall bushes. No. Not here. Anywhere but here. Things happened here. No. No. No. I get shoved harshly into the courts because I hesitated at the entrance. I get flashbacks. The crash. The running. The bleeding. No. No. Get me out of here. I know what this place does to me now.

Robert turns me by the wrist so I am facing him, and he shoves me into the fence, clutching my neck with both hands. Corey and Zari stand by the entrance, standing guard, I guess.

“Remember this place?” he asks. No, stop. The flashback comes again. Stop. Stop. Stop. Stop. How does he know? No. No. No.

I can’t hyperventilate. He’s choking me again. Traditional, old-school choking. I feel his thumbs press into my neck. Surprisingly not that hard, though. I gag as he pushes into my Adam’s Apple. He’s moving his thumbs around different parts of my neck. Blood flows to the bottom parts of my body.

“Ah,” I hear him exhale, “That’s it. So delicate.” I gag again, for once voluntarily. Gross. It doesn’t help that I’m making what could be interpreted as sensual noises. He then slowly pushes his thumbs into my arteries. I go weak immediately. He notices and lets me go. I crumble to the ground, gasping for air. I can tell he’s taking it in. What a pervert.

“Hm, you didn’t last as long as before,” Robert comments, smirking, “Guess we’ll have to practice more.” He kicks me right in the diaphragm, winding me and making me lose all the air I just got back. I slowly cover my stomach with my hands and curl.

He, Corey, and Zari leave me in the courts, still gasping and coughing. All the memories of this place flash back at once. I realize I got lucky. Ish. This place actually makes me weak, and I think that was why I weakened so easily just a few minutes ago. I lie on the concrete, catching my breath and feeling the energy drain out of me.

As soon as I can, I get up somehow and manage to walk into the school. I check the time. I have 10 minutes. I go into the bathroom and check my head. My eyes are a bit red, but not too bad. I use my fingers to comb through my hair, which is all messed up. I look at my neck and see red marks where Robert rubbed my arteries. I zip my jacket up all the way. It doesn’t hide them. At least they’re not too noticeable. They’ll probably go away soon. I decide to keep my jacket zipped and put up my hoodie. That’s the best way to make sure nobody sees them. I slam my hands on the counter and finally calm myself down. I take a deep breath and head to my locker so I can get to Spanish on time.

Spanish brightens my mood a bit, but I can’t shake the feeling that Cher knows something is up. She keeps looking at me and grinning to herself. Does she know what Robert did? Does she know something else? Or is she just making fun of me in her head? I look over at her, but she shakes her head and looks back at the phone in her lap, quietly giggling. Is she texting someone about me? I guess it’s not my business if she is.

Science is worse. Today we have a physics lab, and Mr. Flanders claims that my throat clearing is “distracting” and “potentially hazardous to the experiment”, sending me out of the room, which obviously was followed by many laughs and snide remarks. I can’t believe he called that out in front of all the students; that was uncalled for. He could have pulled me aside and told me or just had me observe from a distance, but no, I was called out in front of everyone and had to stand outside of the classroom, getting looks from passerby teachers and students who most likely thought I was in trouble. Great. Of course, a wind experiment on this one day. It was peaceful in the hallway, though, but now I have to do a post-lab for homework on an experiment I didn’t even get to do. Guess I’ll just use that old noggin of mine.

On my way to PE, I look at the post-lab assignment in my folder. It wants me to record data. So much for that. Perhaps I can stay after school and do the experiment. I go back and ask Mr. Flanders, and he gives me an approving look, saying I can come by and do it alone after school. Good, that fills me up for the week. I don’t have to take the bus home even once this week. Tomorrow I have to make the posters for Journalism, and Friday I have the introductory anime club meeting. That’s good.

Today in PE, as I’m getting ready in the locker room, I see girls staring at me more than usual. They’re actually staring. It’s making me super uncomfortable. I pretend that they’re just staring at my beautiful abs in jealousy, but I know it’s not true. Today we’re playing volleyball, even the boys. One of Robert’s friends has his own posse, and they all go on the opposite team. They keep trying to spike so that the ball hits me in the head. They only succeed once, and I pretend that I’m fine. Nobody would care anyways if I wasn’t, so I might as well not make myself look more like a victim. I feel happy knowing that I was able to dodge the ball or hit it back the other times. It was pretty annoying, though.

Afterward in the locker room, the girls are still staring at me as they pass by. I go to the mirror and look at myself. Nothing’s wrong…I check my neck. The thumb marks have bruised. It shouldn’t be noticeable, though, to the other girls, especially from a distance. It’s so faint. Maybe that’s why they keep staring. I walk out of the locker room without making eye contact with anyone, keeping in mind that I’m so lucky. It only takes ten seconds to lose consciousness if someone cuts your blood flow to your brain, and it takes only fifty seconds after that to kill you for good. Yet I’m here.

**8**

6th graders have to wait in the gym in the mornings instead of the cafetorium like the 7th and 8th graders, so I can’t look for Emily. I sit with Andrew and his friends, who are talking about some video game I haven’t played. It’s an app, and I have a flip phone. Therefore I can’t get it. It’s nice to hear about it, though. It sounds fun. Once they finish the story mode, I’m sure they’d let me at least try it out. We’re going to be let free to go to our lockers soon, so I head to the entrance and stand there with some other antsy kids. Suddenly the entrance doors near the gym (not the gym back door, they’re two different things. The entrance is a double-door) flies open, and a blur of black rushes through the hallway.

“Woah, it’s not like she’s late,” someone comments.

“Maybe she thinks she is.”

“Who even is that?”

“I think she’s some 7th grader. Not that anyone hangs with her.”

“Man, she looks worn.”

“I guess she ran to school, then.”

I know who it is. Emily, of course. I had seen her look our way for a split second before she looked backwards and ahead again. They let us go after a few minutes, and I try to figure out where she went. I head in the direction of Mrs. Pasvar’s room, where her first class is, and I see her walking down the hall opposite me. I keep walking forward, and we pass by each other without acknowledgement. She keeps clearing her throat. Other than that, nothing seems wrong. I don’t know if that’s good or not. I head to my math class.

I’m worried about Emily all of math and English. I mean, she seemed fine, but I just got this feeling from her. This bad aura, if you will. I am anxious to see her in PE and make sure she’s ok. My math teacher doesn’t notice my lack of attention because she doesn’t know me too well, and I’m also not the best at math. Mrs. Rowan doesn’t say anything to me today, but I know she notices my behavior.

During Mrs. Rowan’s class I decide to use the bathroom as an excuse to get out of the room. I see two boys on the floor above me as I’m walking down the hall. We end up in the same bathroom; I head into a stall while they go to the urinals.

“Man, did you see them hickeys on that Emily girl?”

“What? Her? Hickeys?”

“Yeah. They’re barely visible, but Cher managed to get a pic on her phone. Zoom does amazing things, man.”

“So that’s why she’s clearing her throat and sitting out of the lab? Bet she did it to herself. I mean, who would make out with her?”

“Would make sense for an emo to do that to herself. Geez, why doesn’t she just leave? She should just get it all done already. Don’t stay on this planet and make the rest of us miserable.”

They’ve finished their business and head out of the bathroom, leaving me alone. Is the universe trying to tell me something? I keep running into people talking about her; it seems so coincidental. I doubt she’s actually talked about that constantly by everyone. Still, I don’t know what a hickey is, but whatever it is, it’s not looking good for Emily to have one. A bigger question stays in my mind, though: why does everyone seems to not like Emily? What has she done? I head back to English, not feeling any more focused than before.

When it’s time for PE, I quickly head into the locker room to put on my PE clothes and see that Trevor is already there with his shirt off.

“Hey, Cole. What’s up?” he greets with the same usual smirk. I guess I really appear distressed because he gives me a concerned look, quickly throwing on his excuse for a PE shirt. It’s grey, all right, but the collar and sleeves have been ripped off.

“You ok, man?”

“Well…what’s a hickey?”

I can tell he stifles a laugh, “It’s a bruise someone gets on their neck from when someone kisses, sucks, or bites their neck too hard while making out. Regular neck bruises from, say, strangling, are not hickeys. Got it? Sex Ed 101. Why do you ask?”

More people start entering the room, and I shut my mouth, not wanting to talk about it in front of others, especially possible 7th graders. Bruises on her neck? That’s some serious biz. I mean, she’s more than likely single and wouldn’t voluntarily be in a Hickey situation. I’d have to see the marks for myself. Then I hear one of the dudes from the bathroom talking to his posse of friends about the rumor and the evidence. Trevor’s held-in laugh dies. He looks to them and then looks back at me, eyes wide. I nod.

“Meet me on the bleachers when you’ve changed,” he whispers, taking his leave, “I’m now worried, too. It’s never been this bad for her.”

I head to where he is on the top of the bleachers. I sit down and exhale, looking for Emily on the court. Everyone’s playing volleyball today, and the girls have been forced to play because the guys didn’t want to play such a “girly” game on their own. I see the boy from earlier and his posse head to the other side of the net from Emily, as do most of the other kids. The coach has to force people to go to Emily’s side.

“That always happens,” Trevor tells me, “Don’t let that get to you. They’re gathering up as a social group. It would happen even if she was absent.” That doesn’t do too much to make me feel better.

“Tell me what happened, Cole. What do you know?”

“Well,” I reply, off-guard by his intensity, “I heard that guy”- I point to the boy from earlier- “and another guy talking in the bathroom. They say that some girl named Cher used zoom and took a picture of Emily’s ‘hickeys’. Apparently she also had to sit out of the science lab because she kept clearing her throat. I had actually noticed the throat-clearing this morning, too. I…I actually think she was choked…”

“I do, too,” Trevor replies, “I saw her at lunch yesterday, by the way. She had coughed a bit, but that’s not why I suspect her. On the first day, I noticed that her zipper was down and that she kept rubbing her neck. I normally wouldn’t notice her, to be honest, but she did it so often that it kinda drew my attention. This morning only confirms it. Someone is choking her. If she has bruises on her neck from it, that means she’s in big danger. It takes less than a minute to die if someone blocks blood flow like that. Cher is one sick girl, though. She went through that much effort, and she probably sent the picture to everyone she knew.”

“So what do we do?” I have no idea. I want to help, but we don’t even know who’s doing it to her. What Trevor just said is also scaring me. Less than a minute? I’m scared for Emily; I really am. Trevor himself is scaring me, too. My first week of middle school, and I’m wrapped up in something like this. It’s kinda weird.

“Well, we need to figure out who’s doing it, first of all. I have some suspects based on what I know about her, but I don’t have any proof. She probably won’t tell us if we straight-out ask her. All I do know is that I’m sure she’d like this to be stopped without authoritative intervention from, say, administration or parents. So I’d like to go that route first, but if it doesn’t work I can easily get someone, even the police if I have to. I’ll keep a closer eye on her. You do so, too, ok? If you get any info as well, no matter how minor it is, let me know as soon as possible.”

“What do you plan to do?”

“Don’t worry about that, Cole. It’s your first week at this school; I don’t want to get you in trouble. Just focus on observing her and getting information. Keep her safe as best you can.”

I agree, and something in the back of my mind asks if this is really our business. I say yes because she is in danger of her life now. The thought still doesn’t leave my head, though.

“I think that we should report whoever did it, though, to the police if it gets too out of hand on our own. Then we can make sure that they don’t do it to anyone else.”

“Cole, I have this covered. Once I find out who it is, I have a plan. The police are involved if necessary. I don’t want you in trouble now. I don’t have much left to lose if this falls through; you do. I actually wanted to do something like this last year, but I couldn’t bring myself to be proactive about it. Now, though, I can and will.” I nod and look back at Emily. A quiet gasp escapes me. They’re aiming at Emily’s neck. Trevor gets a look of disgust on his face. She’s able to dodge most of the shots, but one gets her square in the face. She’s ok, though, luckily.

“Ugh,” Trevor groans quietly, looking down with a scary glare, “Why are people so frikkin stupid?” Wow, he actually feels strongly about this, too. Even though I haven’t known him for long, I know it’s uncharacteristic.

**9**

I grab some snacks for lunch and head up to the library, like I did yesterday. That Trent-or-whoever kid is there again, and I do something I never thought I would do. I sit at the table he’s at. I feel really scared, but if I can at least feel him near me, it makes me feel a bit better. He looks up at me, nods, and then returns to his book. I take out my snacks and realize he doesn’t have any food. It would be rude to eat in front of him without offering, so I place a bag of off-brand chips in the middle of the table. He looks up at me. I nod, and he takes the chips with a thankful smirk. Wow. He didn’t even make a sarcastic comment. This could work.

“Dammit, Robert,” I whisper to myself as I feel my neck again. Dang, I said that out loud. The boy doesn’t show any indication that he heard me, but I know he did. Man, who knows what rumors could come of that if he tells someone I said that? I’m surprised there aren’t any already, but I feel lucky for that at the same time. I look down at the snacks in my lap and start eating while reading, trying to not worry about the potential consequences of my words. I mean, if he’s in here, too, then who does he have to tell, right?

Luckily nothing else happens later in Algebra. Jack doesn’t even give me a look. That’s nice. I have English afterward, and we have to write about what’s different this year in school versus last year. I almost laugh out loud. I give a censored paragraph on the most superficial bullshit like the social situation (pretending it’s good) and higher expectations. We also have to write in history, which ruins writing for me.

Lastly I have choir. They’re doing vocal testing today. We all already know I’m basically the lowest voice there, but I still have to test. The teachers put me in the front row, so the girls behind me have a great time feeling my hair and commenting on its smoothness and straightness. Well, guess what? That’s what happens when you don’t put products in it all the time and just leave it as is. It’s definitely annoying, and I know by now that they won’t stop if I ask them. They did this last year, too. I just let them do it while showing my obvious annoyance.

I find out what part I am, soprano or alto, tomorrow. Hopefully that means I’ll be less annoyed if they move me to the back of the alto section. A lot of the girls messing with me are definitely sopranos, so I’d be separated from them. Yay.

School ends, and I head to Mr. Flander’s room to make up the experiment from today. He doesn’t even ask if I’m doing better. He just grunts and shows me the table. I do the experiment on my own and then thank him quickly before leaving. That only took me 15 minutes, so I have about 15 more until my mom comes. I decide to walk in the halls until then.

While there I get to think. Somebody must’ve noticed my bruises. That’s the best way to explain why everyone was staring at me today more than usual, especially in PE when my jacket was off. How could that happen, though…? I think back through today. Doesn’t take me long to get to first period. Cher. She wasn’t texting someone; she had taken a picture of me, most likely my neck, and probably spread it. I’m not sure how I reach that conclusion, and it seems a bit far-fetched. I haven’t heard any comments from anyone about a situation like that today. However, it’s better than anything else I can think of.

Today I avoid looking directly at my mom so she doesn’t catch a glimpse of the bruises, which really isn’t too different from the norm. I’m surprised I’m so self-conscious about it; they’re barely noticeable. We go home in silence, listening to the radio station play 10 minutes of ads. Mom doesn’t bother changing the station. When we get home, I go straight to my room and lay on the floor, staring at the ceiling.

I could have died today had Robert not taken me to the one place where I felt most weak. I have to start fighting back. I know I have been up until now, but I’ve only done so during incidents where it’s too late. I need to be proactive and prevent them from happening in the first place. Had I really tried, I might have been able to escape this morning. I need to stop bowing to everyone’s desires. If nobody’s gonna help me, then I need to help myself. I like to think that I’m strong for having been through all that I have, but I can’t fight the fact that I’ve been too weak to prevent problems before they occur and lessen my suffering.

I decide that tomorrow I will sit in the back row of the bus, so I can see everything. If anyone has a problem with that, namely Robert, I will stand firm and tell them that I can sit there if I want. I won’t let Robert, Corey, Zari, Cher, or anyone else lead me to danger. I will fight to survive. That is the point it’s gotten to.

Robert comes to my dreams. As do many other bullies I’ve known. I switch randomly between random places I don’t even know. No matter where I am, I try to hide from them as they talk about something I can’t hear. I’m now at the school in the back area. I’m wrapped tightly from the neck down in white sheets. Robert is lifting me above his head through a crowd of all my enemies, who are holding torches and yelling, even though it’s midday. I look up and see an old jacket on the wall. The sleeves are tied together over a large nail, making a nice hole. I freak out as I get carried closer to the pseudo-noose, realizing what’s happening. They all chant loudly as Robert pushes me up until my head is as high as the jacket. I look through the hole at everyone. It’s a cloudy night now, and I can’t move. I scream, but it doesn’t register with anyone. Robert moves his hands out from under my feet, and I snap awake as I fall into the noose, screaming.

“Shut up,” my mom yells groggily. Guess I screamed after I woke. I’m sweating, and it takes me a bit to realize that I’m alive and that it was just a dream. I look at the time. 1:30. I groan quietly and toss myself over. I can’t sleep the rest of the night.

The next day, I pump myself up with as much heavy metal as possible before I get to the bus. The new Sick AM song stays stuck in my head, keeping my adrenaline pumping and overtaking my mind, leaving me in a state of false confidence, awareness, and rebellion. I hope it lasts. I sit in the back, nodding my head and moving my arms and legs to the imaginary beat, probably looking like an angry, wide-eyed psycho. Like I care anymore. I feel like one anyway; I’m on the verge of maniacal laughter.

Robert comes on the bus and sees me in his spot. I glare at him, almost pleased, and he glares back. He sits in the row in front of me. I keep playing the song, pumping myself for whatever he has for me. Wait…why didn’t he say anything? He didn’t call me a name or anything. He just glared. I prepare myself for a verbal onslaught, but it doesn’t come. He doesn’t even look at me.

Corey and Zari come on the bus. They are about to speak, but they look at Robert, then at me, and sit across the aisle from Robert. Is this some sort of sick joke? Are they trying to make me let my guard down? I walk behind them into the school after the bus drops us off, and they don’t even look back at me. Did Robert magically, by a slip of chance, realize what he did yesterday? Did the twins? I guess I should just be lucky that nothing’s happened yet. It makes me even more paranoid, though.

While on the steps, I keep looking around more than usual. I’m sure I look like an idiot, but hey, they all already think I am. The excess adrenaline wears off soon before first period, but seeing Cher gives it a boost. I play the Sick AM song again on my MP3 player, pumping myself up. I need to defend myself from her as well as Robert. She whispers to me as I pass by, and although the name she gives me is not too creative, I hate it nonetheless.

“What’s up, Hickily?”

I guess I was right about yesterday.

**10**

“Hey, Michael,” My mom asks in the car, “Are you doing ok?”

“Yeah,” I reply, “It’s been awesome so far. Why?”

“You just seem to be thinking more than usual. There’s nothing wrong with thinking more, but I’m just hoping nothing’s wrong.”

“No, I’m fine. Thanks for asking, though.”

“Ok, then good,” my mom sighs, relieved, “Well, have fun with Andrew and Trevor today. Also, I’m glad you have an upperclassman like Trevor to help you with your first few weeks of middle school. It’ll make it easier. Remember, too, that you can talk to me about anything. I’ve been through middle school before; I can probably help.”

We pull up to the school, and she smiles and waves as I walk out, waving back. I head to the gym, and the entire group looks at me as I approach.

“What?”

“Oh, nothing,” Andrew replies, laughing awkwardly, “We were just surprised you were here so early. Sorry if we freaked you out.”-His face gets more serious- “Also, do you know what happened with Robert? I saw him this morning, and he looked kinda scared. I asked him about it, and he wouldn’t tell me what was up.”

With Robert? Weird. Robert’s a big guy, what could scare him?

“No, I haven’t heard anything. That’s surprising, though.”

“Yeah.”

We all talk about video games, and I’m still jealous because I don’t have a console. I’ve only played on other people’s consoles. I really want the BS8, but my mom has never said yes. I’d ask for my birthday or Christmas, but they’re so far away. This other kid named Jesse got one for his 5th grade graduation, and he won’t shut up about it. I’ve learned a lot about it, though, form hearing him talk.

I don’t see Emily this morning. Is she absent?...Dead? I push that thought out of my head and go to my first period. That period goes by boringly, and English does the same. However, I’m able to talk to Mrs. Rowan before class starts. I tell her I’ve been considering her proposal that I do some soul-searching with my emotions, and I ask if she has any tips. I’m embarrassed to ask, but after the past few days, it’s obvious I need help with it.

“Try writing down events in your life and how they make you feel, like in a notebook or something,” she suggests, “It can really help to write stuff down. Don’t make it too structured. Just write. Who knows? Maybe those events or feelings could help in writing a story. It also helps if you have someone to talk to as well, like a parent or a friend. I know many boys don’t like talking to other about feelings, but I suggest it just in case you have large emotions. Some emotions can’t be handled ourselves without it destroying a part of us. Just a suggestion. Try that for yourself. Good luck.”

She smiles at me, and I sit in my seat. The rest of class goes by smoothly. Writing, huh? I might try that, at least listing events. It might help me remember some stuff. For a confidant, though, I’m unsure. I don’t know if I’d want to talk to mom about everything. Trevor says I can talk to him about whatever, but I barely know him. It would be kinda weird telling him my life history even though he knows about my lungs and my dad already. I guess I’ll figure it out once I get large emotions.

Trevor’s already on the bleachers when I get to PE, so I quickly change and join him. I look for Emily again and find her entering the locker room. Good, she’s here. I look over at Trevor, and he winks at me. Guess he figured out who was strangling Emily?

“What did you do?” I ask, nervous about his confident aura.

“What I did isn’t important,” he replies mysteriously, looking ahead at the court, “but my suspicions were correct. I found out who it was yesterday at lunch. I just happened to hear her whisper when she rubbed her neck. It doesn’t take a rocket scientist to put pieces together. I was suspecting them anyway.”

“Who?”

“I don’t think I should tell you, man. I don’t want you going to him or telling others about him. It would be dangerous for you, seeing as you’re new to everyone here. I, however, don’t have much to lose: people know me and already have shitty opinions. I have a plan; I’ll tell you once this is all worked out. I’ve got this under control. So, what else is going on with you?”

“Oh, well…” I know Trevor’s not going to continue on this subject without resistance, so I answer his question, “This morning Andrew was talking about how this kid Robert looked kinda freaked out. Hopefully I can ask him what’s up at lunch.”

“He’s probably just got nerves. He’s a 6th grader, too, right? He might just be stressing.”

“No, he’s a 7th grader, like you. He’s Robert Kurt.”

“Oh?” Trevor looks over at me sharply, wide-eyed, but then acts calm. However, I can still see tension in his arms. Why did he get so tense? It’s not like Robert would be a bully to him or anything. Robert seems nice. Man, Trevor really is an open book.

“Do you know him?” I ask innocently, pretending to ignore his body language.

“Yeah, I’ve heard of him,” Trevor replies, “He’s got a reputation behind him. Are you friends with him?”

“He hasn’t said so, but we sit together at lunch with Andrew’s crew. He talks to me and stuff, so I think he likes me, at least.”

“Well, I guess that means you don’t have to worry about being on his bad side.”

Wait a minute…how did I not get this before? Trevor doing something bad, Emily’s attacker, Robert being freaked out, Trevor’s body language at the mention of him being my friend and what he just said, could it be…? He wouldn’t, though…would he? I feel bad about not having faith in my new friend, but I have a hunch.

“Trevor. Be honest with me.”

“I won’t tell you his name or what I did; other than that I can be honest.”

“It…was Robert, wasn’t it? Robert strangled Emily. It’s no coincidence that you do something and Robert is all scared and nervous the next time I see him.”

Trevor sighs and looks down at his knees, then looks me straight in the eyes. “I hoped to keep it from you for your protection initially, but so much for that since you know him personally. At least you are on his good side. Yes, it was Robert. Don’t tell anyone, though, especially him. Don’t even act different around him. If he doesn’t think you’re involved, he won’t hurt you. If he does, tell me.”

**11**

So, it turns out that Cher had taken a picture of my neck yesterday in first period and sent it to every one she knew. She had captioned it, “OMG, Emily with bruises on her neck. I’d call them hickeys, but who knows if they’re real. Like if you think she did it to herself for emo attention; comment if they’re real and prove Emily’s a dingy, emo slut.” I don’t know how many likes or comments there are, and I’m not sure I want to know. I guess they weren’t aiming for my head in PE, then. They were aiming for my neck. Luckily they didn’t hit it.

My bruises are fading now, not that they were very visible to start with. My throat is also finally less sore. I can breathe, and I’m barely, if ever, clearing my throat. It feels good for once, but I know I can’t expect it to stay like this. I’ve gotten lucky only for now; who knows what’ll happen later?

We do our first speaking labs in Spanish, and of course I get Cher as my partner for most of the time. Not that my other partners were much better. In science we watch a Bill Nye film, so while I don’t get verbal assaults, I do get poked from behind a lot. I swat them away before many hit me. Someone even throws paper at me. I snatch it, glaring behind me. I realize the best way to defend myself here is to make it seem like I didn’t know this paper was a note. I silently hide and open the paper so they can’t see or hear. “Hickily or Emoly? What’s the difference? Still a dyke,” it reads. Dyke? I’m not a lesbian. People and their assumptions. I carefully fold the paper back up and throw it away when class ends.

Cher’s nickname for me has officially caught on; I hear it constantly now. In the locker room, I have to hide in a shower behind a curtain before anyone sees me. I don’t want any one staring at my neck again, especially as I’m changing clothes. I wait until everyone leaves the locker room before I get out of my spot. I head out then and am informed that we’re playing basketball. Obviously nobody passes to me, but I intercept a few times. Too bad I’m a 20% shooter. I do make a half-court shot, though.

I head to lunch and make sure nobody sees me go up to the library again. The other dude isn’t here yet, which seems odd. He’s normally here when I come in. I decide to leave a bag of chips on the table he normally sits at so I can avoid an awkward confrontation. If he doesn’t come, then I’ll just take it before I leave, but something tells me that he’s just late.

Of course, my instincts are correct. He comes in about 5 minutes later and is surprised to see the chip bag on his table. He looks up at me, but I look away and into my book, scared by his excitement. I look back at him from inside by book, and he holds the bag in both hands, staring at it kinda longingly. Can he not have this stuff at his house or something? Then he sits with his book and eats the chips in a way I had never seen before. He’s savoring them, eating tiny bits at a time. Weird. I guess he doesn’t get chips often.

“Thanks, man, I needed that,” the boy whispers to me at the end of lunch. I look up at him at once, confused. His voice was genuine; he seemed a bit nervous to say it. His face even has a specialty smirk of coolness on it trying to hide his nerves. He…means it? Before I can reply, he’s already turning and walking away, giving me a two-fingered wave above his head. I guess I should leave chips at his table more often.

We have a quiz tomorrow in Algebra, which of course makes everyone groan. Who gives out a test on the first week of school? At least I’m good at Algebra; others may not do as well. I mean, this is an honors class, it’s not like anyone will fail, but many of these kids get punished for below a 95. It’s called the Asian Fail here. Later the English teacher gives back our writings from yesterday, and her comment on mine reads, “Nicely written, but not very insightful,” Aw, she caught me. Too bad. I’m not telling her the truth. She’d be forced to tell my mom, and who knows what would happen there.

When I get to choir, I sit in my front row seat for what I hope is the last time. Ms. Morgan gets up to the front and has us stand on the opposite side of the room from the bleachers. Everyone’s murmuring about who’s going to be in what section, in addition to their usual chatter about boys and general gossip. She goes to the top row of the soprano section and points at each seat, calling the name of the girl who sits there. She goes down the rows, and I’m happy to hear that pretty much all of the girls who touch my hair are there. I won’t have to deal with them.

“And in the final seat of the front row for the sopranos, Emily R.”

Well, shit.

**12**

I look for Trevor at lunch and realize for the first time that I have no idea where he sits. I keep a watch out for him as lunch goes on, but I never see him. Maybe he has a different lunch period. I’m sitting at my usual table with Andrew, Robert, and co, and nobody is talking to Robert, who still seems a bit wary. Since I hadn’t asked him before, I ask as naively as I can if he wants to talk about something. He looks over at me with almost pitying eyes. I rub my arm and look away, telling him he doesn’t have to if he doesn’t want to.

He stands up in his seat and walks away from the table, nodding at me to follow him. I look at the table, where everyone is preoccupied, and follow him. He takes me quickly around the corner and down to the music wing. I instantly fear him beating me up or something, but I shove that out of my head. Robert looks honestly afraid and willing to talk. Besides, I only think that because of what Trevor told me. I stand across from him and wait for him to talk.

“Ok, man,” he starts nervously, “First off, don’t tell anyone this, ok? I can’t have it getting around. I feel like I can trust you, Am I right?”

I nod hesitantly. It’s not like I’ll tell anyone who doesn’t already know. I’d probably only talk to Trevor about it; he knows already anyway since he’s the perpetrator more than likely.

“Ok,” he continues, “You see, yesterday morning those same bros and I were messing with this one girl. We were just messing with her, really, but this one kid had scared us shitless by screaming like a teacher. We’d run away and yelled at him for scaring us like that. So yesterday after school this same kid walks up to me. His name’s Trevor; he’s some lame Asian punk weirdo in my grade. Anyway, he goes up to me and my bros and shoves a photo in our face. He threatened us and told us he would send it all over if we didn’t stop messing with her. He even said some scary stuff about her dying and all that. I kept telling him it wasn’t a big deal, but he kept at it. Normally I wouldn’t put up with that, but he’s got some heart thing. I can’t just punch him to make him shut up; I don’t want to kill him or something. He was just savage, kid. It was in his eyes, too. He’s really insane; probably because of insufficient blood flow in the skull of his. Or because his mommy died and now he’s all emo.”

Robert. Oh my god. How did Trevor get a picture? I ask Robert the same question, trying to ignore his verbal attack on Trevor for now. I think I’m seeing Robert’s true colors, and I don’t want to spoil that now.

“He always carries around a digital Polaroid. He probably used that. Bro, that picture can’t be shown to others. It doesn’t look good at all. If it goes out, who knows how people will interpret it? I miss messing with someone, though. It made the days less boring, you know? I need someone else, you know? I also need to make sure you don’t tell. So this works out, huh?”

I see a gleam in his eye, but I have no time to react before he sucker punches me right in the diaphragm, winding me hard. I collapse onto my knees, gasping for air. Robert looks at me with puppy eyes and acts like he has no idea why I’m on the ground. I can’t even glare at him. Wait, this isn’t good. I can’t get my breath back. He’s walked away by now, so I quickly pull out my inhaler and try my best to regain my breath. By then lunch is over, and I take my stuff from a now-empty lunch table and head to Theatre.

I’m still recovering a bit when I reach class, but luckily we don’t do too many verbal activities. After class, Trevor is standing across the hall from the door, as he has been. I don’t know what to say after hearing what he did to Robert; I just look at him and hope he talks.

“Hey, Cole,” he says, “Still worn out from sitting on the bleachers like a couch potato in PE?”

“Huh?”

“You’re sweating quite a bit,” he explains, chuckling, “Did you all exercise in theatre or something?”

I have to lie. “Yeah,” I reply, still slightly breathy, “We did a lot of choreography stuff for the play.” Wait. That doesn’t happen until after at least the auditions…I hope he’s not knowledgeable about theatre to take that into account. Unfortunately for me, Trevor catches on to this contradiction. I see it in his face.

“Cole, I’m fine with many things. Bullshit is not one of those things. It’s that simple. You don’t have to tell me what’s going on, although I want to know, but if you don’t want to tell, just say so. Don’t pathetically lie to me. There are too many liars running this world.” He looks at my stomach, and I realize I’m still holding it and take my hand away.

“Did something happen, Cole?” I think about what he just said. I can’t tell him what Robert did; I’m not ready.

“…not really.”

Trevor turns and walks away with those first words repeating in my head. Robert’s words also come into my head as I watch Trevor leave. How could Robert say those things about Trevor? Should I tell Trevor what Robert said? Does Trevor know what happened to me? How could he?

I sigh and head to class, hoping to hide all of this. At least Emily is safe now. However, now I’m concerned for my own safety. I’ll just wait and see how it plays out. I feel like this should be a bigger deal to me; I mean, he just did what he did. I’ve already forgotten specifically what it was, though. I know he socked me in the diaphragm, but I don’t have much memory of it now…maybe that’s what I do to avoid deep emotions? I forget? It seems right…

**13**

Choir was not good, but it could have been far worse. Our teacher moved some people around that kept talking and messing around, so some of the girls who liked touching my hair moved. It totally stunk trying to sing like a soprano, though. It hit my manhood right in…well, wherever it is for me. I must admit, though, that I don’t entirely hate choir. The girls do, in fact, treat me more similarly to how they’d treat a boy. I hate how they coddle me as if I’m some petting zoo animal, but I see them do it to boys. I just have to keep that in mind to keep myself sane.

After school, I have a short meeting with the two other editors for the Journalism club, Libby and Chase, and then we work quietly on the posters to put up in the halls. It’s too bad that our school colors are purple and white; I wanted to have red in the poster. Wait, nobody said I couldn’t… I put the title in red and draw a purple stripe behind it. It clashes enough that it looks good. Libby and Chase had no objections, so I was in the clear.

When I finally get home, I waste no time going up to my room to think. Today was creepy. Robert and his group did nothing to me. Sure, others like Cher did their normal thing, but Robert and his group are the most notorious of them all and are never ones to back down. Part of me thinks that I should be grateful, but the other part worries about what they’re “planning”. Maybe they’re psyching me out. If they are, it’s working. I breathe in and out. I do it again. It almost feels weird to me now that my breath can come so naturally and smoothly, without pain or soreness. It’s pure breathing right now. Just being able to breathe freely without worry of it being taken away. I can’t imagine getting used to this.

Turns out I don’t have to get more used to it; I fall asleep to terrifying and suffocating nightmares. I barely remember them, though, but I wake up three times in the night because I have to regain my breath. I try my best to keep it quiet so my mom won’t hear. The third time wakes me up at 3:30 AM, and I finally decide to not go back to sleep despite how tired I am. I walk almost blindly to my bathroom at the end of the hallway and take a drink of water in the dark.

I look up into the mirror above the sink and barely see my reflection. What little light I get through the window reveals almost a silhouette on the other side. It is me yet not me. Its eyes are gone in the black. It is shrouded in darkness as if the darkness is a warm blanket, not only comforting but also hiding. This person is not me, but I feel—and almost fear—it is me in the future.

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I get out of bed at 6 AM, and I’m horridly tired. I hadn’t been able to truly go to sleep after that last dream, so I’m operating on probably 3 hours of actual sleep. For music today, I just listen to Bela Logusi’s Dead over and over. It’s calming and lasts 9 minutes, so it works out with my tiredness. I quietly sing along with it.

Again I have no bus issues. Weird, but I guess I won’t complain. I feel a bit better now, but I haven’t let my guard down. Robert and his group don’t bother me all day, but others do. Cher still calls me Hickily, as do many others, but I try to ignore them. My neck bruises are even more faded than they were; I didn’t even notice them today until I looked real close. I guess people still won’t shut up about it, though.