PERFECT

-Avni Sehgal, Maharaja Surajmal Institute of Technology



The eyeliner makes the dark circles less pronounced. The lip gloss hides the trembling. The ponytail conceals missing patches of hair. The Abercrombie sweater covers bruises. I might look at bit thinner, but everyone will ask about my new diet. My hair might not shine the way it used to, but the pink ribbon will distract curious eyes. One hour of preparation and I look like myself. One hour of preparation and no one will know. One hour out of 24. Sometimes I wonder if it’s worth it – wasting a twenty-fourth of my day on a lie. But then I see my wispy hair and baggy eyes, and I have to do it.  
  
Checking my makeup one last time, I push my sleeves up, though not past my elbows. I slip on a cute pair of flats – heels are too dangerous with shaky legs – and grab my Hollister bag. Padding downstairs, I inhale the scent of waffles and syrup.   
  
“Morning, Mom,” I call.  
  
“Morning, baby,” she chirps. “Did you sleep well?”  
  
“Better than I have been.”  
  
She sighs, and her eyes look a hundred years old for a minute. “Any improvement is good,” she says half-heartedly.  
  
“Of course.”  
  
“I made waffles.” Her offering.  
  
“Thanks, Mom. Smells delicious.” My offering.  
  
I sit at the table and she hands me a plate. The thought of all that food turns my stomach, but I force a smile and thank my mother again. She busies herself at the sink and fills the silence with chatter. When she turns around, she takes in the waffles still on my plate, only missing a few bites. I smile apologetically.  
  
“I’m not very hungry this morning.”  
  
“You’ll need your strength for this afternoon.” She bites her lip. She doesn’t like to bring it up over breakfast. I eat another bite.  
  
“I packed your lunch.”  
  
“I’m 18, Mom. I can pack my own lunch. You have more important things to do.”  
  
She reaches for the paper sack. “But now I know you’ll have something to eat. And you need to eat, okay? You have to keep your strength up.”  
  
Sighing, I take the bag. I know this peanut butter and jelly sandwich won’t be eaten, not any more than the one yesterday or the day before. And even if I do eat it, I’ll just throw it up later. Anything consumed after 11 ends up in a plastic basin at 4:07. It’s just the way it works.   
  
“Hon, have you thought about what I said the other day?” she asks.  
  
I shrug noncommittally.   
  
“Sweetheart, you can’t hide this forever. Eventually you’re going to miss school and people will start asking questions.”  
  
“Mom, I have two months left of high school. I can make it ’til then. I’m class president and probably valedictorian. I was voted ‘Most popular,’ ‘Most fun to be around,’ ‘Best smile,’ and ‘Most likely to succeed.’ I’m the girl who’s got it all together. People don’t want to know that the girl who’s got it all together, doesn’t have it all together. People don’t want to know that girl is dying!”  
  
“Honey, don’t say that. You’re not dying.”  
  
“Yes, I am. I have cancer. You heard Dr. Morrison. I have maybe a year left. But that means I can graduate and then never see those people again. I’ll die and they’ll feel sorry for me, but at least I won’t have to endure their pity.”  
  
“But …,” she tries to interrupt.   
  
“Mom, listen to me. I don’t want to be the girl everyone looks at and whispers, ‘Look at her. Poor thing, she has cancer.’ I can’t handle that. I want to be normal. Just for these last two months.”  
  
“Okay,” she whispers. “Okay. Just remember, it’s okay if you don’t have it all together. Sometimes things just fall apart and there’s nothing we can do.”  
  
“Thanks, Mom.” I grab my bag and lunch and kiss her on the cheek. “I love you.”  
  
“I love you too,” my mom replies. This exchange, once taken for granted, is now a vital part of every morning, every afternoon, every night. Three little words, followed by four more, have come to mean more than an entire conversation. They bridge all gaps and disagreements, because we both know there is now a finite number left.  
  
Keys in hand, I open the door and blink in the early morning sun. My silver car waits in the driveway and as I walk toward it, I check my reflection in the tinted window. Perfect.

