

*Painted Wings*

Up until now, I never knew what death-con 5 felt like. That's probably because I've never had to study for three upcoming exams for a week. Papers spilled out of my bag and though I said that I didn't care, I knew I should probably stop kidding myself. I definitely cared. That's why even though I'm dead tired I woke up this morning to come to class. That's why even though I didn't really want to be there I sat in the front of the class. That's why I drank a cocktail of coffee and Red Bull this morning to stay awake for this wonderfully, wonderfully, wonderful 8:30 Federal Government class.

I looked back to see who else was in the large lecture hall with me. There were a few other early birds but those who decided to remain conscious were still dazed and lethargic by sleep. As expected, those who shuffled in one by one sat farther up in the back and far away from the kid flooding the table with papers and pens. I took peace in my solidarity. I took the time before class to finish reading the next assigned chapter.

My eyes took the words from the page and kept cramming them into my head. I pinched the bridge of my nose and exhaled. The dull ache at the front of my skull was probably my body's way of luring me into sleep and keeping me from getting work done. I opened my eyes in protest and saw a few of my papers floating to the ground in front of me. I turned and saw a girl with neon green hair and piercings that managed to catch the light in the dim class room.

"Howdy neighbor! The name's Celia" she said before she turned her laptop on and began to watch videos. Seconds later I realized that it was her movements that made my papers fall and that she wouldn't make any effort to pick them up. As I walked around the long table to retrieve my papers I realized that she was the kind of person my sister told me to avoid in college. Unfocused, rebellious and coarse. "Those people will always drag you down with them, Josh. They're worthless and a waste of your

time,” she said. She had the tendency to come off sounding like a bitch when in real life; she was actually a real bitch. But she was the bitch putting me through college since our deadbeat parents up and left us.

The caffeine, sugar and whatever the hell else is in Red Bull kicked in right when class started and to offset the rush of energy by rapidly bouncing my leg up and down. I heard her snort and cover her mouth.

I ignored Celia for the rest of the class period. I would have liked to ignore her for the rest of the semester but whenever I tried to move seats, there she was with a smile that took up too much of her face. As the weeks inched by I began to stop moving around but every once in a while I would try move a seat just to throw her off. Of course, even these attempts failed. It was a little bit unsettling how she managed to find me in the huge lecture class but I attributed it to her insanity.

Once I stopped moving from seat to seat to avoid her, she nudged my arm and pointed at a video on her screen. Some guy was dancing around like a dork but every time the scene changed, he was in a different place in the world, dancing with different people.

“It would be nice to see that many different places, huh?” Celia said.

I gave her a quick, terse smile and turned back to the front of the classroom. I’d missed a couple of slides and was frantically trying to catch up. There was so much that I had to do that I couldn’t afford to waste time. When class ended that morning, she rested her hand on my laptop. I stared at her hot pink nails. There were multiple nicks and smudges, and much of the nail polish was on her skin.

“You know, you smile like you’ve got a stick up your ass,” she said.

I didn’t know how to respond to that, so I didn’t. Instead, I packed up and walked out of the auditorium. Just because I chose to focus on my school didn’t mean I have a stick up my ass. It just meant that I was responsible and that I was going places. Law school.

Every class thereafter she tried to talk to me or show me a video but I didn't respond until right before the final. Her hair had already cycled the rainbow and I lost count. Now she was exploring more "normal" colors. Now it was a deep red-wine color.

"I have to apologize for what I said earlier," she said as she strolled up to me.

My hand hovered above the knob of the auditorium door but I decided to hear her out, just this once.

"I realize that my comment about you having a stick up your ass may have been offensive. You have a right to have sticks and, um, other things up your butt if you want to." She chuckled. "Although I hope you had fun and were able to ease up a bit, ahem, those other things."

I felt my face heat up. My clenched teeth made my head hurt and it took several minutes for me to smooth my fists into hands and then to lower those to my sides. She was already gone by the time I was able to calm down. Hopefully I wouldn't have to see her again. That was my wish for Christmas and New Year's.

Unfortunately dreams don't always come true. This one actually kind of blew up in my face and Celia began popping up everywhere. She was in this class and in that one. She would "coincidentally" be having breakfast at the same time I was or she would "run into me" while I was trying to study in the library.

This time, when she sat next to me in class, she would act as though we were best friends and would jabber on and on about nonsense. It took me a semester and a half but I was sick of her bullshit. If ignoring her for this amount of time wasn't giving her a hint, nothing but the cold hard truth and possibly a restraining order would

"Look I'm sure you're a fantastic person for some other guy out there but I would appreciate it if you could just leave me alone." I said before class started.

She leaned far away from me and put her hand over her mouth. "You think I like you?"

Her shoulders trembled and her hair covered her face. Aw shit, I could already feel my face getting red. Was she going to cry or something? I definitely was not expecting to hear laughter leave her mouth.

“Sorry,” she said between laughs. “Do you want me to like you? Between you and me, you don’t really have a shot. You’re the type of kid who takes things too seriously and I’m here to help you.”

I didn’t need or want her help but she stopped me before I could tell her.

“You think I’m just some crazy rebel who wants to cause trouble, don’t you?”

That and so much more. I didn’t even know where to begin when it came to her.

“Well guess what? I’m more like your fairy godmother or your guardian angel. Either way just meet me at Chevelt Hall at 8. Then you might understand what I’m trying to tell you.”

I wasn’t obligated to show up at Chevelt, and I have no idea why I Did. Maybe it was that sense of finality in her voice. It felt as though if I did this one thing, she would leave me alone forever. Plus, I didn’t want to find out what she would do or say if I didn’t go.

When I got to Chevelt, I couldn’t help but stop and scoff. Of course Celia would be a dancer. Chevelt was made up of concrete pillars and huge glass panes that let any passerby watch dancers, actors, and artists hone their craft, whether or not they wanted it to be seen. I stood outside to watch Celia dance. The confidence she had seemed to waver as she tentatively placed her pointed feet. A second look at her smooth face made me realize that she knew exactly what she was doing, it was just difficult. She couldn’t leap or lift her legs as high as everyone else, and as the exercise they were working on progressed she became noticeably slower than everyone else. As class her class moved on she stumbled and spun but she kept pushing herself forward, ~~reminding me of a bird trying to fly.~~

Was that how she saw me? Someone who pushes themselves when they’ve become tired and weary. I was so caught up in my thoughts that I almost missed it. She threw one of her arms forward to break her fall but she placed the other on the crown of her sky-blue hair. Several dancers began walking

to her but ended up being shooed away by the instructor. He gave the class a couple of exercises to do and pulled Celia aside. From what I could see, Celia did not like the conversation but she ultimately nodded her head and agreed to whatever her teacher said. She got her bag and left the building.

I didn't have to run very fast or far to find her sitting on a bench with her head in her hands. Before she noticed I was around, she gripped her hair and slammed it against the ground. I could see every dip and bump in her head.

"The fuck?" Celia was sick? I thought Celia was a lot of things but sick was never one of them. She was loud, a little obnoxious, persistent, hell-raising, annoying but I would have never added sick to the list.

She looked up at me with red-rimmed eyes. Without her wig I was able to notice her barely-there eyebrows, her sunken-in cheeks and the sagging, gray bags under her eyes. I picked up her wig and shook the dirt out of it. I thought of all of the colors she went through and my throat closed up a bit. Did they mean anything to her? Was this her way of coping with whatever she had?

"I'm sorry," I said as I held out her wig. Sorry for the way that I acted towards her, sorry for her sickness and sorry that she was wasting her time on me.

She furrowed her thin eyebrows and shook her head. "You don't get it. You still don't fuckin get it."

Obviously not. She snatched the wig from my hands and threw it on her head. The synthetic fibers caged and hid her eyes.

"I want to dance. To be able to jump, and spin and feel the music on my skin. I want to do something extraordinary, something that says that I lived. What about you?"

"I want to become a lawyer."

"Is that it?"

What more did she want from me? I had my goals, I didn't need anything more. I was just fine but I saw what she meant as well. I somehow got through my first year of college with no real, permanent friends.

We started off by sharing lunch every now and then, although she would barely eat anything. Sometimes we would study with one another but we would always get distracted. Actually, she would always find a way to distract me by making stories about other people in the library.

"Lauren quit texting the guy. You guys went on one date, you're not in love!" she said, pointing to the girls sitting a couple of tables down. She moved her index finger to a group of guys talking in hushed tones. She tried to whisper in her best guy voice.

"So you finally got into it, man?"

"Yea, but it's so stupid."

"No it's not. My Little Pony is actually really cool. Just watch a couple of more episodes and you'll see!"

That one made me laugh so hard that we got kicked out of the library for a while. I would try to keep us on track but she would just churn out joke after joke and I began to stop minding. Instead, I found ways to work while laughing. Sometimes I was the one who would point to people and make up stories and her laughter, instead of mine, would be the reason we were kicked out.

Weekends we would alternate between her apartment and mine. We would play board games, make pancakes, watch TV, bake and look up funny videos on the Internet. One time we dared ourselves to do all of those things at once and we ended up burning the pancakes.

There were times when her brother would make the three hour long drive from their hometown to check up on Celia and see how she was doing. Every time he came, we would always find an excuse for him to drive us places even though he was tired. Once, Celia and I convinced him to drive us to their hometown. \_\_\_\_\_

We didn't always try to burn apartments to the ground with breakfast foods or drive older brothers mad. Sometimes we would force ourselves to laugh until we really did and make ourselves cry until we felt better. We would talk about life, the future, and our pasts.

"I swear we're just like a Lifetime movie right now. The two unlikely friends, one is sick with cancer and the other..." she said.

I finished for her. "The other is the son of two heroin addicts and was raised by his older sister."

Celia sighed deeply and looked at me. "That sucks."

I shrugged. I my parents were rarely home anyway so I barely knew them and the part of me that wanted to know them was gone. "It's whatever. How about you Ms. Hembrook?"

It was her turn to shrug. "When I was younger, I was a lot like you. Super serious and a pain in the ass. I wanted to be an accountant. Can you believe that? What kind of kid wants to be an accountant, right? Anyway at around twelve I started acting weird. I started having these crazy headaches and I couldn't speak correctly. When I stumbled out into the front lawn and had my first seizure, that's when it was obvious that something was clearly wrong."

She told me how she spent years of her life in a hospital. The thoughts of dancing numbers and quick calculations vanished from her mind and all she really wanted to do was feel the sunshine on her skin and breathe in deeply. Within the first few months of her treatment, her hair thinned and fell away, her stomach turned to stone at the thought of food and if she tried to eat anything, it would become a volcano. As days, then months, then years dripped by like medicine, she began to get better. Life was this terrifyingly amazing thing laid out before her and she grabbed onto it as tightly as she could.

When she was fourteen, she thought that she would be able to run wild and have fun like other kids her age. She would be able to take her life in her hands and show the world that her cancer was only a minor setback. She would be fearless; she would be someone who could live her life to the fullest.

She would be someone who even after being in remission for four, going on five years would get cancer again.

"I was so close to being completely free," she said. We laid in the grass, swaddled under blankets and stars.

She was close too. That night was the last normal night we spent together. The rest of our days were spent in and out of the hospital. Infections, bouts of pneumonia, and even the common cold would be the reasons why. With each visit I could see her will begin to break. She was tired of fighting for so long and for so hard, but still I wanted her to. I needed her to.

Her laughs quieted into chuckles which then became completely silent smiles. She would just lie in her hospital bed and look outside the window. I tried my hardest then to make her laugh.

"So remember those My Little Pony guys from the library last semester?"

She shrugged and turned to look at me. "Yea, so what?"

"It turns out they started a club on campus and it's actually pretty popular. I thought that maybe we could watch a couple of episodes and if we liked it for some reason, we could both join in the fall.

Also, I have some fruit tarts and éclairs from that French bakery your brother said-

"I can't eat that" she said.

"What do you mean? He said they were your favorite, Celia."

"I'm not going to eat that so you might as well give them to someone else. I don't really want to watch a TV show about rainbow ponies that talk either. I actually just want to be alone right now so do you mind?"

"You know what? Fine then, have fun staring out the window" I said. I went home and ate a couple of the pastries while watching the show. As much as I hated to admit it at the time, she had good taste, and the show was absolutely horrible. As I kept watching the show and eating her food, my anger ebbed away and I forgave her.



She stopped wearing wigs and for the first couple of days I had dreams that whenever I went to go visit her, everything would be in black and white. When she had the strength, she would write letters to family and friends back home. Every time I would visit, she would have one sealed in an envelope, ready to be sent out, and she'd be working on another. For three Weeks I was her thesaurus and her mailman. At times I offered to write the letters for her but then her chapped lips would settle into a line and she would huff and say that each letter was personal. Only the recipient should get to read it.

For twenty days, I took the bus from school to the hospital, helped Celia with her letters, read to her some of the assigned reading for school and took the finished letter from her to be mailed. Her parents were already by her side but by day four more and more family members appeared. To give them privacy, I waited outside but even then, I could feel their stinging rage and solemn sadness. None of them were ready to see her go.

On Day Twenty, there was no one in the room but her and me. There were a few sealed envelopes face down on her night stand. At the time, I didn't realize why she had so many done.

"That must have taken a while," I said. I reached over and grabbed her hand. I knew that writing and thinking about what she wanted to say tired her out, so I was a little surprised and proud of her for doing so many. Maybe she didn't need the letters anymore and would be able to tell people, in person, everything and anything she wanted. She would be able to laugh about the letters she already sent and it would all be a sad but funny joke.

"Yep. It did." The way she popped the 'p' had me convinced that she was getting better. The medicine was working and like before, she would fight through her illness. She would have the chance to be the person she wanted to be and live. I squeezed her hand a little bit and I felt her grip tighten as well. When visiting hours were over, I smiled and said that I would see her tomorrow and she did the same. But even then, the call I got at 4:37 a.m. was hardly surprising.

On Day Twenty-One, I didn't go to class at all. I dragged myself from my apartment to the hospital. It towered over me as I stared it down. This was the place where she was supposed to get better. Tons of people who were sicker than her were in there but they got better. People who were fighting the same fight as her got better. So why couldn't she? Why didn't they do all they could to help her? Why did they have to let her die?

I went to get answers instead I got a letter from her, given to me by her parents. By the time I returned home, the letter was crumpled and moist. I sat and stared at it for hours. I kept flipping it in my hands. On one side was my name, scratched across in her messy handwriting and the other side, smiley faces.

*Dear Sgt. McBoresnooze,*

*I hope you understand that this Private gave a good fight. In all seriousness though, you need to just take a deep breath. I'm not going to say anything stupid or sappy, like I've always loved you and that I wish we could have made a billion of babies together. There's enough cliché in this letter to last a lifetime (well it lasted my lifetime, heh) so I promise you, I'll try to avoid as many clichés as I can. Just know that I'm glad that you were able to relax and enjoy life, if only for a little while. Its been a ton of fun and if I had the chance to have kids, I would tell them all about our antics. But don't do the same because knowing you, your kids would probably think you're a creep for telling them about some dead chick. That's really weird man, don't do it.*

*Instead what could you do is, I don't know, catch a movie? Just distract yourself for a little bit and then remember how you have school and get back into it twice as hard. I got you pretty distracted when we were hanging out but even then you still managed to get things done. Good shit dude, good*

*shit. If it counts for anything, I'm proud of you and I hope you have a great and successful life. Thanks again for all the fun, Joshua.*

Private Drunlin (a.k.a. Celia Hembrook)

The air was thick with earth-scented moisture making it hard to breathe and even harder to laugh. I looked up at the guardian angel that stood above us with its arms and wings spread upward and wide. Why was it here now? She didn't need it anymore. She danced her way to heaven with a rainbow behind her, I just know it.

I lined up the cans of spray paint at the base of the angel. I knew what would happen if I got caught but Celia was worth it. She was more than worth it. I took out the surgeon's mask that she gave me and covered my mouth and nose with it. It still smelled like her. I concentrated and the ball in the paint can rattle. I wasn't worried about getting caught or messing up, I just wanted to make Celia smile. Color washed across the stone as I drew my hand across.

Celia was always someone special in life, so why not in death? Aside from the gold and silver I used for the wings, the angel was a rainbow of color. The base was a deep emerald color that mixed with neon yellow. As the angel rose, the colors changed more frequently.

When I was done I climbed down from the pepto-bismol pink face and looked up at what I had done. Halfway up the angel, I gave up on making the bands of color even in size and I just sprayed random blotches of color onto the porous stone. The scent from the paint continued to perfume the air.

Every inch of the statue was painted and I was sure that she was smiling down at me. Its rainbow halo rippled in the midday haze and the blues, pinks, greens, oranges, reds and yellows all blurred together creating a beacon of color. In the rows and columns of headstones, hers would be the

first one noticed and the last one looked at. Now she would be as outrageous, fun, and beautiful in death as she was in real life.