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Fiction Writing: Writers as Shapers

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### **Lies on Lies**

What was River doing when the world stopped? He can't say with certainty. He remembers sitting alone in the science classroom, notebook in hand. He wrote something that made sense at the time, but now it melts in his mind, crawls up his arms, holding him in a suffocating embrace. His breaths, his choices, his movements were no longer his own.

In that single moment when the world came crashing down, River was thinking about himself. He tried to find someone that never felt like it was him to begin with. He tried to find the words to solidify his place in that classroom. All he could find was the deafening silence that enveloped the room after the announcement played.

"How would you describe yourself?" Jacqueline asked him that once. It happened in the very same science classroom he sat in that moment when he heard she was gone. They were separated by test tubes and lab notes. River glanced over towards Jacqueline, her notebook held close to her chest, never letting River see what she was writing.

"Like I'm me but not." He replied with the expectation that this answer would satisfy her. He was used to this routine. The person would nod, feigning understanding, then leave before they must pretend to care more.

"What do you mean?" The question was innocent when the person was not. Her eyes sparkled with a curiosity River never saw before. She stayed rooted to the spot, a solid being that was

telling him that they were not going away. She was there, and so was River. For a brief moment River felt solid too.

“Well...I’ve never thought about it too hard before.” He laughed, closing the binder he had been organizing. “I guess I just mean that I’ve never felt like myself before. There’s this divide between who I have to be here and who I am inside. That sounds ridiculous, huh?”

“Not as much as your usual stories.” Jacqueline said, using a teasing tone that felt foreign from their past conversations. She looked up at him for a moment, quick enough that River could not read the emotion that flickered across her features. Her next words were quiet, barely above a whisper. If they had not been alone in the classroom River may have missed them. “Have you ever found a way to close this divide?” River didn’t have an answer, and so he chose to pretend that he didn’t hear her at all.

Something about that entire conversation struck a cord with River that he was never able to figure out, not even when Jacqueline disappeared.

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“Move it.” River is shoved aside, colliding with a locker as one of the bulkier jocks of the school rushes past. River watches him go, hardly noticing the throbbing pain that begins to spread across his shoulder. The sensation is enough to jolt him back to life, and suddenly the world starts to move again. The shadow of thought starts to solidify into letters, rearrange themselves in words. The reality that hits him hurts more than physical pain.

“Hey! Watch where you’re going. Are you good, River?” Chance races towards the lockers, slowing to stand before River. The jock from earlier shoots Chance a look before disappearing into one of the classrooms. Chance turns his attention towards River. He grins like a person who never felt the world end.

“I’m fine.” River says bluntly, turning his attention towards the group behind Chance, who stare at River with an air of disinterest.

“Oh, okay. That’s good.” Chance’s grin never wavers. He pats River on the back. River flinches.

“Hey listen, sorry about what happened to Jacqueline. I heard you two were kind of close.”

River’s jaw clenches. “We were lab partners. I wouldn’t say we were close.” He wants to leave, he wants to tear Chance’s hand from off his back, he wants to pull away back into his state of timelessness.

“Still, it’s gotta be hard for you, huh? I mean, you had to see her every day. You must have known her to some extent.” River shifts from foot to foot, praying for this moment to end.

Finally Chance moves away, along with the rest of his group.

“Oh, and if you see Leona can you tell her we are looking for her?” Chance shouts at River as he turns the corner with his friends.

*It’s only been fifteen minutes and I already want to go home.* River bangs his head against the locker. He stays there until the warning bell rings and he is forced to head to class.

The rest of the day is a blur. As he sits at his desk, he feels himself pull away once again. He allows himself to float away. His actions are made with the tug of a puppet string, his voice a record.

The next time he finds himself pulled back into reality is at the final bell. The same jock from this morning shoves him into another locker, rushing towards after school practice. The force of this shove is enough to knock River to the floor. He sits there catching his breath, surprised at the loss of feeling in his legs.

“You said your name was...River, right?” River looks up to see a hand extended, and there stood Leona. River glances around with mild interest.

“Where is the rest of your group?” River tries to lift his legs, one at a time, trying to regain feeling.

“Probably at football practice.” Leona shrugs dismissively. River notes the dark rims that circle her clouded eyes. The girl he thought he knew is a husk of her former self. He feels a pang of sympathy as he finds himself sinking into her hollowed body, fading away into the darkness where the world has stopped moving.

“I need you to look at something for me.” Leona continues, rummaging in her bag. While she is searching, River finds the will to move. He stands beside Leona.

*She's smaller than I thought.* He hadn't realized it when he handed her the box of Jacqueline's belongings earlier. Here he finds himself more aware of his body, the way his eyes have to glance downwards to meet Leona's. River stumbles away.

“I don't think we have anything to say to each other.” He tries to turn away from Leona, only for her to block his path towards the school entrance.

Leona shoves a cassette player in his face. It looks big in her small, trembling hands. “I need you to tell me what this is.”

River's stomach sinks. “It's a cassette player.”

“I know that.” Leona snaps. She flinches, realizing the harshness of her words. She takes a breath before continuing. “It was Jackie's. She used it for her science projects. You two were close, right?”

River backs away, fists clenched as he tries to calm his racing heart. “We weren’t close. Just because we sat together in one class.”

“But she mentioned you.” Leona insists, her eyes desperate. “She talks about you like you’re friends!”

“Well we weren’t. I have to go.” River tries to pass by Leona, but she grabs him by his arms. Her nails dig in to his skin.

“Please. I just need you to explain this..this duo..duos...”

“Super ore?” River blurts, unable to stop himself.

“So you do know what I’m talking about! So you two had to be friends!”

“No...” River shakes his head. “No. She was your friend. She was part of your crowd. We weren’t close...we weren’t...”

Leona’s gaze softens, and she gently releases her grasp on River. “I’m sorry. I don’t know where my head has been lately. Nothing makes sense anymore and I just feel like I’m tearing apart. Maybe you weren’t close, but you must have known what she was doing. She never talked to me about it, not that I would have understood anyways. But you were there. I saw you in the classroom with her at lunch. You saw her notes. You understand what she was doing. Please, just listen to this tape and tell me what it all means.” With that, she gently places the cassette tapes into River’s hands.

“If you want, meet me in an hour at the diner. If not, put the player in Ms. Briggs’s classroom and I’ll pick it up. I’ll never speak to you again if that’s what you want, but please just listen to this. I

think you were closer than you think.” Leona walks away quietly, leaving River to stay in the dark, quiet hallway.

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River rides his bike towards the radio station, his conversation with Leona weighing heavy on his mind. He almost misses the radio station, tucked between two taller, more intimidating buildings. Part of him wants to continue riding home, knowing that all that awaits him is Jacqueline’s sister, Suse and a heavy air that makes him want to pull away. Yet despite that part of him screaming, another part forces him to turn his bike sharply and stop in front of the building.

He chains his bike outside and enters the building, noting a couple of boxes marked *records*. He grabs one and, with a grunt, starts to head up the steps. With every thud on the creaking wooden stairs, he feels the weight becoming heavier.

*Why would Leona want to know about the super ore?* River only knew the myth that surrounded the substance. It had been one of the many papers he gave to Ms. Briggs for his science projects. Jacqueline had started a project on the ore a year ago, but in the end she-

“Ah, River.” Nyla Brooks stands by the radio station door holding a bag of takeout from the diner. Her eyes are rimmed with red, which River pretends not to notice.

He tries to smile, resulting in a small lopsided grin. “Hi, Ms. Brooks.” He turns his attention to the door. “Nothing today?”

Nyla sighs, glancing at the door with a look of longing. “Suse won’t come out. I’ve been leaving takeout at the door. It disappears the next day so she’s eating, at least. Other than that I haven’t seen her outside at all.” She smiles apologetically. “Thank you for coming. I know it must be hard, after everything that happened.”

“I can’t imagine how difficult it must be for Suse.” River says, trying to swallow a lump in his throat. He places the box next to Nyla, who places the takeout on top. “Her and Jacqueline seemed to really connect this past year, you know?”

“Yeah.” Nyla replies softly. “I thought they were getting along really well. There’s just so much I can’t seem to wrap my head around. The sheriff has been conducting an investigation, but we don’t have much to go on.” River nods along, his mind wandering away towards the cassette player tucked away in his jean pocket.

Nyla turns to the door and knocks quietly. “Suse? River is here. Can you please open the door?” There is a deafening silence that envelops the two people. River can hear his heart pounding in his ears, reminding him that he is there. He becomes all too aware of his stance, of the way his feet shift from side, of how his chest rises and falls quicker with each passing moment.

“Not today, I guess.” Nyla turns from the door with a sigh. “You can head back home if you want.” She reaches into her uniform pocket and grabs her wallet, pulling out a ten-dollar bill and handing it over to River. “Here. Stop by the diner and grab yourself a treat.”

River grabs the bill stiffly, muttering a “thank you” before turning away. They both head down the stairs, with Nyla moving ahead as River finds his feet slowing with each step, like a toy on low battery. Nyla reaches the door first, and before she grabs the handle, she turns to River.

“You were a good friend to Jacqueline, okay? Don’t beat yourself up over this. Whatever happened is not your fault, so don’t take the whole weight of the world on your shoulders. We all have to work together to get through this, okay?” With that, Nyla leaves.

River stands rooted to the spot, feeling as his soul snaps back into his body. He falls, finding it difficult to breathe. His eyes well up. He lets the tears pour down his cheeks, holding his face to

muffle the sobs so that Suse will not hear him. He stays there for a moment, trying desperately to collect himself as reality crashes into him like waves, pulling him back into despair as he tries to claw back to the sanctuary he had desperately tried to maintain.

River grabs the cassette player from his pocket. He tries to recall his friend's face. He tries to picture her with the same player in her hand. He imagines her low murmuring voice ringing in his mind. He imagines her there, put together and solid. He wants to reach out and pull her back into the reality. He wants her there to talk to, to fill up the silence so they can pretend it doesn't matter to them. He wants her there to rant about the people around them, to share secrets that only they understand. He wants to feel alive again.

Holding the player close to his chest, mimicking the way he remembers Jacqueline recording her studies, he presses play.