Jessica Blackmer

Fiction Writing: Writers as Shapers

May 4, 2024

**Lies on Lies**

         What was River doing when the world stopped? He can’t say for sure. He remembers the words like a gust of wind from a hurricane, knocking the air out of his lungs. He felt the words push him into a nothingness he had long since grown accustomed to, but this time it was different. There was a time when the empty world was a sanctuary. In that moment, in that classroom with only the ticking of a clock and the heartbeat that reminded River he was alive, he realized the space was too quiet.

What was River doing? He had a notebook, so he must have been writing. He tries to recall the words, but they jumble in his mind, melting away into nothingness. He feels them slither across his arms like gentle whispers, holding him in a suffocating embrace.

In that single moment when the world came crashing down, River was thinking about himself. He walked through his empty world like a hall of mirrors. He imagined himself distorting, a liquid being, ready to be molded. He was always different wherever he went. At school, he is the freak who believes in fairytales. At home, he is the happy boy who will do anything for his family. He is everything and feels like nothing. He reaches the end of the hall. There was a single mirror before him, and as he stood there, letting the announcement sink into his skin, shattering the vast nothingness he had sunken into, he wondered why he couldn’t picture himself.

“You are nothing to me.” Jacqueline’s words ring in  River’s ears in the silence of the classroom. For a sliver of time River jolted back to life. He hated that this was the thought that came to mind, the one that forced him to face reality. He hated that this was the thought that crossed his mind when the world started moving forward again. He hated that this was how he saw himself when he thought of Jacqueline.

“Move it.” River jolts back to life as one of the bulkier jocks of the school rushes past. The painful sensation that runs across his shoulder reminds River that the world had kept moving after the announcement of Jacqueline’s death. It has been three days since then, but he feels like he has been asleep for years. The thoughts that he kept at arm’s length start to solidify in his mind. The reality that hits him hurts more than the throbbing in his shoulder.

“Hey! Watch where you’re going. Are you good, River?” Chance races towards the lockers, slowing to stand before River. He grins like a person who never felt the world end.

“I’m fine,” River says bluntly. He casts a glance towards the jock who pushed him, who shoots a glare at Chance before going into one of the classrooms. Then he looks at Chance.

“I’m glad to hear that.” Chance pats River on the back. River flinches. “Listen, I’m so sorry about what happened to Jacqueline. I heard you two were kind of close.”

River’s jaw clenches. “We’re just lab partners. I wouldn’t say we’re close.” He wants to leave. He wants to tear Chance’s hand off his back. He wants to pull away from reality.

“Still, it can’t be easy, right? 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. He spots the rest of Chance’s friend group approaching. Some of them eye River with an air of sympathy. Others turn away, bored and ready to move on.

“Listen, if you ever want to talk it out, don’t be a stranger, okay?” Chance finally moves his hand off River’s shoulder. “Losing someone is hard, and the best way to get through this is by relying on each other.” He must have rehearsed that line, River thought. Or maybe that came naturally to Chance, a real knight in a cheap varsity jacket.

“Oh, and if you see Leona around can you tell her we’re looking for her?” Chance says as he and his group turn the corner of the hall.

*It’s only been fifteen minutes, and I already want to go home,* River thinks as he bangs his head against one of the lockers. He stays there until the warning bell forces him to head to class.

The rest of the day blurs together. He lets himself pull away once again from reality. His movements are practiced. No one notices him drifting away. All they see is the same River they always saw.

The next time he is forced back into reality is at the final bell. The same jock from this morning shoves him aside. The push, which is barely a nudge, sends River to the ground. He sits there, surprised by the loss of feeling in his legs.

“You said your name was… River, right?” River looks up at Leona Micheals. She stands before him in the empty hallway, fidgeting with the strap of her backpack.

“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 replies, shrugging. River notes the dark rims that circle her cloudy eyes. The girl before him is more frantic, more out of place than the popular girl who usually roams the halls. She shifts from foot to foot, her lips pursed as though the act of standing before River is mentally taxing. River feels a pang of sympathy as he realizes she too is pushing herself out of reality. Time never did start moving for them when Jacqueline was pronounced dead.

“I need you to listen to something for me,” Leona continues, rummaging in her bag. As she does so, River regains feeling in his body and stands up.

*She’s smaller than I thought.* He hadn’t realized it when he handed her the box of Jacqueline’s belongings a few days ago. That was the closest they had ever gotten to one another in the years they had known each other. She has always been a person who seems put together. She knows herself, and River envies that, wishing he could say the same for himself. He cannot find a place in reality, but she always could. Now he finds himself all too aware of his own body, the way he has to look down to meet Leona’s gaze.

“I don’t think we have anything to say to each other. I only gave you the box because Ms. Briggs said you might want it.” He tries to turn away from Leona, only for her to run in front of him and block his path to the school entrance.

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

River’s stomach turns. “It’s a cassette player.”

“I know that,” Leona snaps. She flinches, realizing how harsh the words sounded. She takes a breath. “It was Jackie’s. She used it for her science projects. You two were close, right?”

*Not close enough to call Jacqueline ‘Jackie.’* River backs away, fists clenched as he tries to calm his racing heart. “We are not close. We just happened to be paired together in science class. That’s it.”

“But she talks about you in this.” Leona insists, her eyes desperate as she holds the cassette player closer to her chest. “She talks about you like you’re friends!”

“Well, we weren’t. She is a part of *your* friend group, remember? I have to go.” River tries to pass by Leona, but she grabs one of his arms. Her nails dig into his skin.

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

“Duostrillinium?” The word came out of the darkness of River’s mind, pushing him further into reality. Face it, it tells him. Admit the truth. “How do you know about that? Did Jacqueline tell you?”

“So you know it! How can you say you two aren’t close if you know about her project?”

“No…” River shakes his head. “No. She is your friend. She is a part of your crowd. We aren’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 has been making sense since they announced Jackie was… that she’s dead. Everybody else is able to move forward, and I’ve just been so stuck. No one else wants to talk about her. Like *really* talk about her. Maybe you two weren’t close, but you know what she was doing in that classroom before all of this. She never told me about it, not that I would have understood any of it. But you’re smarter than me, and you had to have seen her working. I saw you in that classroom with her at lunch. Please, just listen to the tape and tell me what it all means. I think this is the only way I… that *we* can move forward.” With that, she gently places the cassette player into River’s hands.

“If you want to talk, meet me in two hours at the diner. If not, put the player in Ms. Brigg’s classroom. I’ll pick it up, and we’ll never talk again if that’s what you want, but please promise me you’ll at least listen to the tape. I think you two are closer than you think.” Leona smiles weakly at River before walking out the school entrance.

River stands there in the dark hallway, realizing that the hallway is too quiet. He feels his soul try to pull out of his body once again, but the weight of the cassette player anchors him in reality.

*I can’t deal with this right now.* He decides, placing the player in his backpack. He races towards the bike rack outside the school entrance. He fumbles to unlock his bike, but finally he is riding towards the radio station. He is not sure why he decides to do this. Maybe he is hoping that it will provide some semblance of normalcy. This thought is insane, and River knows it. No place in town has any sense of normalcy anymore, much less the radio station. Part of him wants to pedal faster as he nears the station, but a stronger part forces him to turn sharply towards the door and lock his bike on the rack in front of the building.

He 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 ask about the super ore?* River almost laughs at the term “super ore.” If Jacqueline had heard him she would glare at him. Duostrillinium is the word she used for the substance. “Super ore” means that the substance is another one of River’s myths. He recalls the first time they talked about Jacqueline’s newest project a year ago, but then in the end she-

“Ah, River.” Nyla Brooks stands by the radio station door holding a bag of takeout from the diner. River pretends not to notice her eyes are rimmed with red or that her uniform is crumpled.

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 worriedly at the door. “Suse still hasn’t come out. I’ve been leaving her takeout and it disappears the next day so she’s eating at least. Otherwise I don’t think she’s left that room in the past three days.” She smiles apologetically at River. “Thank you for coming. I know the news must have been hard on you, too.”

“Not as hard as it must be for Suse,” River says, trying to swallow a lump forming in his throat. He places the box next to Nyla, who places the takeout on top. “Her and Jacqueline were really connecting this past year, you know?”

“Yeah,” Nyla replies softly. “I thought so too. Suse was so happy to be reconnecting with her sister again. Now I don’t know what I can do for her. I’ve been hearing around the station that the investigation isn’t going well. No one seems to know how Jacqueline got into the cave systems.” River nods along, his mind wandering towards the cassette player in his bag.

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

“Not today, I guess.” Nyla sighs. “You can head back home if you want. I’d say you did your job as well as you could today.” She nods towards the box River had brought up. She reaches into her uniform pocket and grabs her wallet, pulling out a ten-dollar bill and hands 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.

“How would you describe yourself?” Jacqueline asked him that once. It happened in the same classroom River sat in the moment he heard she was gone. They were sitting across from each other, separated by test tubes and lab notes.

River was startled by the sudden question. She hadn’t even looked up from her notebook when she asked him. He watched her for a moment, scribbling words she would never let him read.

“I don’t think I have an answer for that.” River laughed. “I guess I never thought about that before.”

“Most people would just say ‘kind’ or ‘strong’ or ‘smart,’ you know.” Jacqueline said, tapping a pen to the side of her notebook.

“Well most people know who they are. I don’t think I’ve ever been able to say who I am.” River replied, suddenly too aware of the way his feet scrape the floor as he tried to swing his legs back and forth.

“What do you mean by that?” The question was innocent when the person was not. Her eyes sparkled with a curiosity River never saw before. By this point River was too aware of his own heartbeat. He watched her close the notebook, finally looking up at him. Her gaze was steady, a beacon toward reality River couldn’t help but follow. She was there and so was River. She made him believe that there was a way for him to belong, to see himself in the mirror rather than the River everyone else wants him to be. For that brief instance, River felt seen.

“Well, exactly that. I feel like there is this divide between who I can be and who I want to be.” River paused, opening the binder beside him to organize. “That sounds ridiculous, right?”

“Not as much as your usual stories,” Jacqueline teased. The tone sounded foreign and awkward in her mouth, like it didn’t really belong there. She turned away from River, quick enough that River was unable to read the look that spread across her face. 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 wondered how to close the divide?” River didn’t have an answer for her, and so he chose to pretend that he didn’t hear her at all, fiddling with papers just to fill the silence that enveloped them, concealing their conversation like a secret that only they knew.

Something about that entire conversation struck a chord with River that he was never able to figure out, not even when Jacqueline disappeared. Now the memory comes flooding back into his mind. He sits on the steps, finding it difficult to catch his breath. He hates this memory. He hates that it reminds him of something he cannot have, hates that it shatters the lie he tries so hard to conceal, hates that the memory wasn’t the first thing that came to mind when the world ended. He hates himself more than anything for thinking that Jacqueline meant everything to him when he is supposed to be nothing to her. He has to be, for her sake.

*I can’t run from this,* he realizes, regaining his composure. He scrambles for his backpack, grabbing the cassette player. He holds it in his hands for a moment. He recalls Jacqueline. He pictures her, holding the very same player in her hand. He imagines her low, murmuring voice ringing in his mind. He imagines her there, put together and alive. He wants to reach out and pull her back into reality. He wants her there to talk to, to fill up the silence to pretend it doesn’t bother them. He wants her there to rant about the people around them, to share secrets that only they understand. He wants to be selfish and call her his friend, even if that meant shattering the image they had created for themselves. 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.