



**Love, it's not really  
what you expect**

**By  
Marc Auf der Heyde**

# Love, it's not really what you expect

\*\*\*

*For my family and friends,*

*And for anyone else who supported me on this hectic journey.*

*Turns out it's not so easy to finish a book,*

*So if you helped me get here, thank you!*

## Foreword by Marc Auf der Heyde

High School is, *essentially* a place of learning. Although, if I'm to be perfectly honest with myself and everyone else in the world, most of what we're taught there, is going to be abandoned the minute after we've been rigorously examined on it. High school is kind of the place you go to after you've been drawing pictures with crayons for six years in primary school. The teachers don't know what to do with you, so they improvise and teach you algebraic functions and imaginary numbers and whatever *other* nonsense it is they deem worthy of being a part of the curriculum.

As it so happened to be, the girl I'll be mentioning at quite an excessive amount throughout this story (The story is about her after all), went to the same high school as me for three whole months while I was on a school exchange in sunny Cape Town, South Africa.

I know what you're probably thinking, three months, this guy is insane, he wasn't in love with her, he doesn't even know what love is. Well then, with no offense whatsoever intended, let me already disprove you without much persuasion on my part. The fact that there are so many misgivings about love, this raw and beautiful emotion, is part of what I'm trying to highlight in this book. I don't need to show you evidence just yet. How about you read the story and if you still have your doubts about my mindset, then I'll listen to your arguments. I'm an open-minded guy after all, I firmly believe *everyone* should be entitled to their *wrong* opinion.

Apart from these little details, there's not much more I really want to say to prepare you, or even to just enthrall you. So, I guess the next thing to do is to just launch straight into the story. But before that, I must confess that I lied as there is one thing I do still need to tell you my dear reader. The girl I write about is one hundred percent real. She exists, I have seen her, I have chased her, and I fell absolutely and fully in love with her. So, keep that in mind as you read this story, the majority of everything you read, even the characters, are probably real (seriously, there's pictures after the epilogue). I say this, thoroughly inspired by the work of the Coen brothers and their manipulation of audiences using the notion of a true story to influence the reception of a work.

## Chapter 1: Arrival, not departure

I arrived at Bergford high school on a Monday morning, with my host Ryan. I remember it all too well, everything about the occasion. The morning was fresh, but not too cold. The sky was mostly clear, but a few clouds here and there were thrown up, nothing out of the norm, nothing strange at all. Except for the obvious fact that there was a German exchange student in the midst of all the *usual* grade 10 activities occurring, just below Founder's Field.

You see in Germany where I was attending high school, the tenth grade offers an opportunity for students to take a semester abroad. Being a South African from birth but having no real representation of what it was like to actually live in the country, I decided that the best choice for me would be to attend a South African school, in this case Bergford high school in Cape Town.

Within ten minutes of my seemingly sudden arrival, I can say with utmost pride and pleasure that at least half the people present, had met me.

"Hi, I'm Arlo the German exchange student. Don't worry you can stay seated, I'm not here to take over any territory. Yet" I said to Sebastian, the first person whom I was introduced to. Looking back now, I can't really think of why I would introduce myself like that. I mean the joke kind of crosses the border of unacceptable pretty damn quickly, and if you don't have that kind of sense of humor, well then, that kind of talk isn't going to get you anywhere in life.

Luckily for me, Sebastian was quite amused. As were the ten-people sitting around him, so, slowly but surely, I moved on making my way through the crowd, meeting and greeting as many of my new fellow peers, before the bell rung. Except the bell didn't ring. There aren't any bells at Bergford. I found that out the hard way.

So, I met most of the people I would soon become very close with, and as Ryan notified me that it was time to go to the first class of the day, I was feeling complete, in a way. I was feeling as though this school, this city, was just the right place for me to be. Which is generally an odd realization to have after ten short minutes, don't get me wrong, I'm well aware of that, but something just seemed to linger in the atmosphere, I guess it was the vibe.

We left the grade 10 hang out area and slowly made our way to where I assumed the English classroom would be. Despite my feeling of belonging, everything but the people seemed undeniably out of place. The buildings were strange to me, the uniforms were strange to me. Everything seemed just a little strange to me, and I couldn't have possibly foreseen just how

quickly I would forget that feeling and begin to feel right at home in the confinements of those very walls and those very uniforms.

We arrived at the room, and I introduced myself to a certain Mr. Willard, who would be my English teacher for the next three months. I could tell straight off that Mr. Willard had everything I liked about English teachers. He was humorous, eager to teach and it seemed that he liked me quite a bit based on our first interaction together, and that made me like him too.

“There’s one thing and one thing only that you’ll learn from me, Mr. Schreiber.” He said to me after the first initial formalities were exchanged.

“And that being what, sir?” I replied, slightly unsure of where this conversation was heading.

“Well, Shakespeare is perhaps, the greatest man that ever lived” he answered, making it sound like it was the most obvious thing in the world. He looked me up and down one last time and bade me take a seat with a cheeky smile. “Now that you know *English*, because Shakespeare is all there really is to know about the language, go and sit down. Follow Ryan and try to have some fun. Otherwise, what’s the point?”

I followed Ryan to the back of the classroom and took the seat beside him. Only *he* wasn’t sitting down like *me*, he was standing. And so was everyone else in the entire classroom. I looked around with a puzzled expression hoping that someone would give me some kind of clue as to what was going on. But no one *did* give me an explanation and in a desperate attempt at normality, I stood up just like my classmates and waited for something to happen.

“Good morning Grade 10’s” boomed Mr. Willard.

“Good morning sir” replied the class in unison. I was as impressed as I was taken aback. Nobody had told me about this seemingly regular routine of theirs. It was like a scene from Todd Strasser’s The Wave, and I was right in the middle of it. For any German for obvious reasons, a scene with that much conformity quickly becomes a living nightmare. I had clearly forgotten that the British had been the main influence on the South African Education program, not the Germans, and that conformity didn’t *have* to mean Nazis all the time. I would soon learn that the formalities were simply etiquette, but still, the first detectable whisper of it managed to steal my breath away.

The class all sat down in their seats at the same time, and I was left standing, awkwardly fumbling to pull out my chair and not make a scene in the first class of my exchange. Ryan also wanted to avoid embarrassment and so he too scrambled for my chair and together the two of us

managed to get my backside planted on the chair, while the teacher waited for the amusement of my catastrophic fumble to die down. Satisfied with the attention he was now receiving from the class, Mr. Willard began his lesson.

“Today we will be going to the Neil Gaiety Hall, where you will hopefully all be presenting your oral assembly announcements. I say hopefully, given that I know most of you probably haven’t prepared anything at all. So, God help us all, don’t be reading it directly from your note cards or from wherever else you manage to write down your work on.

“Please at least try to get a good mark, since it’s getting to the point of exhaustion for me, where I simply can’t be bothered to assign anything at all anymore. This might be one of your last marks this year” said Mr. Willard, waiting for the silence to fill the void left behind after his voice had departed.

“Sir, will we even have time for us all to go today?” asked a girl sitting in the center of the room whose name I didn’t quite know yet.

Mr. Willard smiled an almost frightening smile. “Well Scarlett if you’re so worried about not being able to present today, you have convinced me. You can start us off.”

Scarlett looked crestfallen. It looked like she was realizing that her plan was destined to fail, now leaving her in an awful position also known as the brunt of a teacher joke.

“Sir, that’s not what I me-” started Scarlett.

“There need to be more people like Scarlett in our world,” Mr. Willard exclaimed, cutting off Scarlett’s protest before addressing the class as a whole again, “You have five minutes to prepare and then we’ll go.”

A wave of sudden movement exploded before my eyes, as every student in the classroom hurriedly grasped into their school bags to either retrieve the work that they had done, or, more likely, pens and paper to actually do some work in the short five minutes they now had.

Mr. Willard, still standing at the head of the classroom, seemed to have clear intentions for the next five minutes, though how one could enjoy watching pubescent teenagers squirm for more than 30 seconds, was presumably a rationality lost somewhere amidst our age barrier.

I looked around trying to occupy myself, settling on simply observing the students around me, particularly those I hadn’t met before. Though I expected them to be quite different from the students I knew in Berlin, I hadn’t expected *this level* of different. My eyes eventually came to rest

on Ryan who had visibly started to freak out, bringing me to believe he represented the overwhelming majority of students who had not completed the assignment.

In Berlin, homework was 33% of the overall grade, so rarely did a day go by that an assignment went completely abandoned. As I would come to learn that for most students, homework was a selective evil at Bergford High School, and that the students each chose which subject would be allotted their precious time each evening, given that they simply couldn't do it all.

"I take it you didn't do the homework?" I asked, lowering my head to see what Ryan was writing.

"What do you bloody think? I didn't do jack shit this weekend!" he snapped at me, his head almost bumping into mine. There were also students who simply chose to do none of the assigned work, banking on their ability to wing it through the rest of life. In Grade 10 at least, Ryan was that kind of student.

I smiled to myself. Homework really was *homework* everywhere in the world. Even those who forgot to do it would make every second count just to have something completed. Five extra minutes were like five more rounds in the ring for most students, even for those that only cared enough about their work to keep at bay a call to their parents.

"Alright you've had your time, let's get going everyone" shouted Mr. Willard across the room. Everyone groaned as they quietly shuffled and collected their belongings, no doubt sending last minute prayers in every direction, hoping that something would stick. I followed Ryan on what must have been the equivalent of a trip to the gallows for most of the students, the air thick with anticipation and dread.

As we took our places in the gallery of the hall, Mr. Willard scoured the crowd looking for his first group of 'victims'.

"Scarlett, Sean, Amanda, Evan and Liam. Please go down and present your announcements" said Mr. Willard as he pointed to each of the five in turn.

We waited patiently for the first person to take to the stage and were surprised when Neil danced his way up the stairs, and waited for permission, to get whatever lay in store, over and done with. **Neil, you're not Scarlett**, is what I would have said if I'd been the teacher in charge. Mr. Willard must have concurred and what soon became clear was aligning humor, made him far too likable for an English teacher.

“Neil, you’re not Scarlett? Wait, maybe this is part of the announcement. Take it away Neil” said Mr. Willard, waving his hand with a grandiose gesture.

“This Thursday, the National Honors Society would like to invite you to come and join us as we investigate the ongoing affairs in so called danger zones such as Syria and Palestine. We will be joined by guest speaker-” started Neil. I wasn’t really listening to what he was saying. Come to think of it now I can hardly remember what it was he was even announcing. What I do remember, and I remember it very well, was the very distinct *camp* Irish accent, with which Neil delivered his words to the audience in a calm and clear manner.

“Is Neil an actor?” I quietly whispered to Ryan, who was still seated beside me as we watched the current events unfold.

“No” he whispered back.

“Is Neil gay?”

“Yes” whispered Ryan as he chuckled a little loudly, receiving a slight scowl from Mr. Willard.

“It’s always either or when they’re that articulate” I said, half-jokingly, half serious.

## Chapter 2: Make friends, not enemies

“Matrics may leave,” the head girl spoke with a stern and crystal-clear tone, “Rest of the school dismissed.”

I was confused. So *very* confused. Even attempting to try to understand the events that had just taken place, were taking a toll on me. It was all so much, and I wanted to understand. But I couldn’t. I literally had no idea what had just happened. And the more I thought it over, the more confused I became.

\*\*\*

Ryan and I entered the assembly hall for the second time that day after a brief introduction to the second Monday morning class; Mathematics. Not only had he forgotten to explain to me that there would be an assembly at this time, every Monday, Wednesday and Friday, he had also forgotten to elaborate on what all an assembly entailed, especially the singing. This may not sound like crucial information for an exchange student to know well ahead of time, but some things are much more of a culture shock than others, in this case the singing, and they shouldn’t be ignored.

“Our song for today is, God shall be our witness” said Ms. Cliffords, as the last students had filed into the hall and were now standing straight, blazers present, and top shirt buttons closed.

And then they started singing. Every student, every teacher, in an uncomfortable breath of harmony they started singing, like it was their routine flash mob rehearsal time and that this was the most normal thing to do in the world. And maybe that’s why I reacted the way I did, given that I was taken so off guard. I didn’t know the lyrics, nor the melody to hum along to, so I simply laughed, a moment before I could stop myself. And by God, was that the wrong thing to do.

Faces turned towards me from all directions, blank, puzzled faces all wondering why I was laughing, and quite frankly who I was. The crowd that presently surrounded me was very slim on the ‘already met Arlo’ list, and they seemed, to put it lightly, *unimpressed*, for lack of a better word.

It didn’t take long before Ms. Cliffords had zeroed in on me and was already staring with her beady, hawk like eyes, ready to pounce. I tried to look away thinking only to myself between uncontrollable chuckles, ***Great, she looks like she wants to fucking hang me.*** But then of course, it got a lot worse before it got better as Ryan and the boy next to him, Evan, joined in with the laughter, and soon there was a raging competition ongoing which the three of us had involuntarily been flung into. Who could break the laws of physics and win this battle for volume? Three boys

who weren't even sure why they were laughing, or the rest of the student body singing their absolute hearts out?

Luckily, we didn't have to find out who the victor was, as the song gradually ended, our deeply etched smiles unwavering, the assembly begun. Or the clash begun, as I like to call it because that's really all it was. A clash, the sit-down version of a mosh pit that left you fending for your legroom and any place to put down your hands, pushing and shoving, hoping not to cause too much attention to yourself, all the while trying to plant your bum on the floor. It was bloodshed, sheer carnage. And it would happen every week, Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays. Oh happy, happy day!

"Routine announcements from Mr. Harrington, and then the sports scores from this weekend" said Mr. Kennings whom had taken his rightful place at the head of the rows of teachers sitting in front of us, his black robes flowing like a dark river.

"R. Parker to please speak to Mr. Madra at the back of the hall after assembly. S. Little to see Mr. Larney in Room 203 after assembly. M. Cobbler to please speak to Ms. Andala after assembly. J. Krall to speak to Ms. —" droned Mr. Harrington, following down the long list of names he had scrawled on his little piece of yellow paper.

I started blocking out the sound. I couldn't deal with it all, even though I tried. The content of the announcements was boring me half to death, and that without the worry that I had managed to make an enemy of one of my teachers on my first day. To think of all the better things, I could have been doing in that exact moment, like for instance escaping the hall, or maybe getting some food to quieten the increasingly loud groans from my stomach... Well damn, my list would end up being longer than Mr. Harrington's, please let the suffering end.

And then it did end, and as though she were taunting me or trying to provoke me further, Ms. Cliffords stood proudly and called for another song to be sung. Another bloody song. Holy shit. Surely that's excessive?

"Please stand for the final song, God is almighty" called Ms. Cliffords, eyes now fixated on my general direction, as if she were locking onto a target. And so, we sang, this time with my helping voice. We didn't dare laugh for it was no laughing matter. In fact, we didn't dare move, for the obvious danger of impeding punishment had forced us into a stark silence that lingered before us until the very last second.

“Matrics may leave,” the head girl said, pausing as the Grade 12’s at the very back of the hall shuffled outside, “Rest of the school dismissed.”

Ryan looked at me with a wild look of panic. “Let’s go *now*. Just follow me, I don’t want to get into kak for laughing” he said grabbing me by the arm and pulling me towards the exit of the hall.

We didn’t get very far before Ms. Cliffords’s shrill voice shouted after us. It was the moment we realized that we should have split up, just to save one of us. And that would have worked. But we didn’t think that far ahead, in fact Evan had followed Ryan and me in hopes of reaching the closest exit together. He, as well as Ryan and me, had been very wrong with our chosen escape path. Oh, so wrong in fact.

“Evan & Ryan. You three come back here now. I know you hear me, don’t make me come get you” shouted Ms. Cliffords, poison seeping from her words.

“Ma’am, what seems to be the problem?” asked Evan, not even batting an eyelid.

“Don’t play stupid with me. I saw the three of you laughing and smirking. Do you think God enjoyed looking down at you three, disrespecting not only this sacred song but disrespecting the entire school? Have you got anything to say for yourselves? Anything at all?” she asked.

“Well ma’am, I’m actually the exchange student here. It’s my first-” I tried explaining using the same rational and calm tone Evan had used, but I must have hit a nerve because my tone did not save me from a rain of sharp noises and spittle.

“WELL YOU SHOULD BE ASHAMED OF YOURSELF! You are a guest at this school, and you take the Lord’s name in vain while spitting on the foundation of this very establishment? I am shocked I tell you, shocked!” shouted Ms. Cliffords.

I was getting increasingly annoyed at her the more that she spoke. It had nothing to do with her obvious passion for religion, nor even the fact that she was clearly in the joyous business of punishing teenagers, but much rather the undeniable fact that she was an irrational human being. As soon as an argument had started with her, there would be no peaceful ending to it, that’s simply how she played out these situations.

And with that realization I decided to say nothing at all, for anything I said would have precipitated something, even if I had no idea what that something would look like. Evan and Ryan clearly made the same decision, as we allowed the silence to reign supreme.

“Don’t let it happen again,” she said after a few moments, pleased that she had backed us into a corner with her sheer force of volume, “And you two, make sure this boy learns some manners while he’s here.” I almost said something but wouldn’t give her the satisfaction. She hesitated even, waiting for me to open my mouth, but I kept it shut in defiance. She smiled one last time before turning away to leave.

I counted her steps as we watched her turn the corner. 10 measly steps until the spell was broken and the three of us erupted in laughter. We walked outside into the fresh spring breeze, a band of brothers that had somehow survived.

“YOU SHOULD BE ASHAMED OF YOURSELF. YOU’RE A GUEST AT THIS SCHOOL!” I took to the front and mimicked Ms. Cliffords in the best high pitched bitchy impression I could possibly muster up, much to the delight of Evan and Ryan. “Who crawled up her ass?”

“Whoever or whatever it was, I’m glad it’s not me that’s chilling in there” Evan answered, stirring up a fresh round of boisterous laughing that could surely be heard throughout the surrounding area. He extended his hand, gently forcing an introduction.

“I’m Arlo Schreiber” I said to Evan as I shook the extended hand hovering in the air.

“I’m Evan von Kleist. Your only true German competition in Bergford. Your cousins and my sister don’t really count” he said in return, winking to make sure I noted the humor in the statement.

My cousins who, also attended Bergford, were in the Grade above me, Grade 11, and because of them I had chosen Bergford for the destination of my exchange. Kyle and Lukas were seventeen, the sons of my father’s brother, and had both been at Bergford since Grade 8, so it wasn’t the first-time people had heard the Schreiber name.

“So where are you from? You don’t look very South African” I asked, staring at the blonde hair and blue eyes.

“You mean because I’m not black?” he responded. His tone was perfectly unmoved, as was his body language. His eyes gave away less than nothing and for an uncomfortable few seconds, I didn’t know how to react. And then he laughed making it clear that he’d been joking, but it was the first time I’d ever see anyone tell a joke in that manner whilst still managing to keep a perfect harmony between awkwardness and unmistakable humor. But with that break, the humor swallowed the awkwardness whole, it was genius. Evan’s way of telling a joke was much like the

very presence of a comedian's modesty, something very funny but also *unexpected*, shocking even to discover that it exists. It changed my way of telling jokes as soon as I'd been exposed to it, though if it was a conscious decision I honestly can't say.

"I had you going there for a second". He paused. "I was born in Belgium, I have a Belgian mother, a German father and live in Cape Town. So, I speak four languages including Afrikaans which is pretty awesome if you think about it. Bilingual is cute by all means, don't get me wrong, but having four languages to think in is pretty much the gold medal for people who speak more than one language. Three is pretty cool too, but four is the sweet point. With five you're just overcompensating." He said it with such a fantastic arrogance that was difficult to despise, because he said it so simply and factually as if he were recalling a mathematical theorem. Evan said it how it was, why beat around the bush?

"So how long have you been in Cape Town for?" I asked, keen to make friends with the boy I had just met. And while I sit here trying to put into words why and what made me want to be his friend so badly, I wouldn't be able to tell you. But there was something there, and that something told me that this would blossom into a strong and mischievous friendship. And yes, I'm human, I've been wrong before, sure, who hasn't been, but this something was something which I was absolutely and unapologetically right about. It just took a little time to show.

We started walking towards the center of founder's field where Evan had mentioned his friends were *always* to be found during the lunch periods. Two half an hour breaks on Monday's, Wednesday's and Friday's. One half an hour break and a full hour break on Tuesday's and Thursday's. I did the Math, that's six hours a week spent lounging on a field. Naturally, I found it unconvincing that this was the best way to spend an unclaimed six hours of a busy week, but apart from doing homework, there wasn't much else you could do.

And now when I look back on that first day, it's funny to remember how much I would grow to cherish that very field, as well as the time I initially mistook for being wasted. I guess it had more to do with the significance of the field, hence my realization much later that every school has its own Founders Field, that area where pretty much everything outside of the classroom happens. The hub of excitement. But for everyone else it's still just a field. And on that first day, I was still part of everyone else.

"I'm Grace" said one girl as Evan and I arrived at the scattered remnants of a circle.

"I'm Layla" said another.

“Mia.”

“Dylan” said one boy.

“Justin.”

“James.”

There were just so many people, so many introductions happening all at once. I couldn’t even tell apart the people I hadn’t met from the people I had met. And yes, it was rather disorientating to be flung into this mixed salad of people, especially given that they all wanted to know the exact same things.

“How long are you staying?” “Who are you staying with?” “Why don’t you have a German accent?” I worked like a computer, responding with the bare minimum so I could continue working to fulfill each and every query. One after the other kept on coming as if the introductions hadn’t been overwhelming enough. A hundred more or so questions and I’d get stuck in an infinite loop!

“I’m staying till January.” Check and pause. “I’m staying with Ryan”. Check and pause. Easy enough. Two questions down, only one remaining to tackle. The hardest one. Ugh. How does one explain something like the lack of an accent? The presence of an accent, that’s a lot easier, but the lack of one? Hmm. Computer Arlo is unsatisfied with your query but will answer it anyways because he’s a computer.

“I was born here in Cape Town, then I lived in Ireland for eight years, and then moved to Berlin at the age of thirteen. So, I’ve spent more time in English speaking countries than I have in Germany, hence the lack of an accent.” I smiled as I waited for any sign of a response from the crowd perched on their tippy toes. Some of their faces took on vague looks of disappointment.

“So, you’re not actually German?” asked Layla. Aha. The disappointment was because I’m not a *real* German. That’s a first.

“No, I am, I just haven’t lived there all my life” I responded.

“But like are you full on German, like full on, one hundred percent German?”

“Well yeah, both sides of my grandparents were German, and my blood is basically 100% German” I responded again. There was silence accompanied by understanding nods. And then I was no longer a computer as they all settled down to where they had been sitting before, their inquisitive interests quenched for now.

“Well then sit your ass down Arlo and tell us a little more about yourself” said James, beckoning to the ground with his hand.

“Actually, I’m going to take him around to meet everyone else guys. We’ll come back later” said Evan. I felt like I didn’t really have a say in the matter, I mean I didn’t, I hadn’t said another word. But somehow, again I don’t really know how to explain it, I was kind of OK with being taken along for the ride. Evan seemed like the kind of guy who’d sort shit out for you. And I liked that.

We turned around and started walking towards another group, but it wasn’t long before my feet froze to the ground, as soon as I had spotted *her*. Straight ahead of me, in the direction Evan and I had started walking, was hands down the most beautiful girl I had ever seen in my entire life. And I couldn’t take my eyes off her, I mean I tried, but it was as if my fixation was being forced by something I couldn’t quite control, something uncomfortably powerful and irresistible. And so, for the first time since meeting Evan just a moment ago, I took back control over the unfolding events around me and consciously decided that I had to meet this beautiful soul. And that was already the end of it as well as the beginning, for with one fateful decision I had put into motion a series of events that still to this day seem quite unimaginable.

### Chapter 3: The blonde one

“Hey, I’m Emily” said the girl, as we met half way between Evan’s group of friends and half way between the entrances to Founder’s Field.

“I’m Arlo, the German exchange student” I replied, holding out my hand confidently, expecting it to be shaken. Except it wasn’t shaken, the girl just went straight ahead and skipped everything I’d ever learnt about meeting a person for the first time and wrapped her arms around me as if she was greeting her oldest friend. Whether that was just Emily’s way of greeting someone, or if it was just the South African way of greeting someone, to this day I still don’t know. And the German side of me still gets uncomfortable thinking about it, it’s just not done. But I did like being hugged by her, I can say that truthfully. She smelt nice, she looked pretty, if there was anyone going to go around hugging me, I was at least glad that it was her.

“Where are you from?” she asked me. Her smile was dashing, I couldn’t look away. Something about her was just completely and utterly enticing me.

“I’m the German exchange student” I stammered, not exactly finding the words I wanted to say.

“Yeah, you said that already. I’m also German” she said smiling even more brilliantly than before. And then she laughed. A loud boisterous laugh which somehow seemed to belong in its entirety to me. It filled me with its warmth, it was like a radiant of sun shine lighting up my dark world for the very first time.

She *was* absolutely mesmerizing, her face, her smile, her eyes, her laugh, and the way she stood and the way she walked. I could literally go on and on about the things I first noticed about Emily, but those things accompanied by much needed lengthy and vast poetic descriptions would merit a chapter in itself. I could write it, but a chapter like that would be a tedious read, so, I guess the bottom line is that I was completely star struck and didn’t know what to do or say.

“Let’s go Arlo. We’ve got people to meet” stated Evan as he took hold of my arm and pedaled me towards our new destination.

I looked back at Emily midway. She didn’t seem to mind the sudden departure, in fact her face still wore the shadow of her loud and wonderful laugh, and even if it wasn’t meant for me, I smiled back and did an awkward little wave. It was all I could do as my brain tried to rewire itself.

“So where are we going?” I asked, somewhat annoyed at having been dragged away.

“Don’t ask questions, keep quiet and let it happen” he replied. The mysterious aura he was portraying was working as I was all of a sudden very intrigued.

“Let *what* happen?” I asked.

“*It*. Let *it* happen” he replied again, not even vaguely offering a hint as to what it was he was talking about. But then of course, *it* happened.

“Ca, Caaaa. Ca caaaa.” I spun my head around. No bird.

“Ca Caaaa, Ca Caaaa.” I spun my head around again certain I would find the culprit. No bird again. No bird in sight.

“Ca caaaa, Ca Caaaa.” Perched in the corner where the music building and the sport hall met, was a boy around 16 years old, dressed in nothing but his school trousers and one shoe. Shirt, blazer and the other shoe were obviously missing, but why his lack of clothing was bringing out his inner crow, I have no idea.

“What the-” I started looking to Evan for an explanation.

“Just keep walking” he said, walking a little brisker and smiling to himself.

“That was Peter Stroombe, he’s the school drugga. He was suspended last year when he went streaking into the girl’s bathroom. No one knows why he did it, and when he was asked about it he responded that he was simply curious about what lay on the other side. No one seemed to wonder why he was naked while he was wondering about stuff like *that*” said Evan once we were well out of Mr. Stroombe’s earshot.

I was still puzzled. “What does that have to do with literally anything?” I asked, chuckling as I spoke. It’s a question that you may also be asking at this point, so I’ll tell you what Evan told me all this time ago, even though it didn’t really clear anything up.

“I just thought you should know. He exists, we know he exists, and yes, it is probably the weirdest thing about Bergford.” Then we both started laughing venturing onwards to meet more people. And he was right, I would need to know about his existence, though whether he was the weirdest thing about Bergford, I’m not entirely sure.

---

“So, Arlo, have you set your eyes on any girls yet?” asked Evan, leaning over the table behind me.

Evan, Ryan and I were sitting in history class, the last lesson of the day and with nothing to do for the last five minutes of class, the conversation ended up where all conversations of a 16-year-old boy usually end up: Girls.

“Well there is this one chick” I replied, taking note of how I was speaking. I don’t think I had ever in my life, referred to a girl as a *chick*. Well that’s douchey.

“Which one?” asked Evan.

“That blonde one?” I questioned.

I looked to Ryan for help, I knew, he knew who I was talking about, I had told him all about my encounter in the lesson directly after lunch.

Ugh. God what was her name?

“That German one!” I exclaimed. Surely by now Ryan knew who I was talking about. If he did he refused to acknowledge it and instead sat quietly in his chair, shaking his head and wanting the situation he was in to dissolve as quickly as possible. And I had no idea why. Didn’t Evan say earlier that he was the only other German beside my cousins and...

“Do you mean my sister?” asked the boy sitting behind me.

Ah for fucks sake. I slowly turned around to face Evan. No. How was that possible? It wasn’t. It couldn’t possibly be possible!

“Just kidding” I said, my voice brittle, barely holding itself together.

“Well this is awkward,” Evan was laughing now, “Don’t sweat it bro. If you don’t hurt her, I won’t hurt you. But wow, that is a funny coincidence dude.” I looked the big man up and down, his muscles bulging through the strained uniform as I shook my head in disbelief.

My level of ignorance astonishes me even now. But again, it was my first day, there was a lot of information to take in, so much information. In hindsight, yes, I should have taken in the information that Evan was one of five Germans at the school and combined that with the fact that Emily was also German. But I didn’t, and for the least part, I got a funny story out of it.

## Chapter 4: Invitations and Stephan's craft beer

The first week at Bergford came and went, faster than I expected it to go, and soon I had built up a very simple routine making me feel right at home. In the morning I would wake up, get into the shower, shower, get out of the shower, get dressed, drink the tea Stephan, Ryan's dad, would have brought for me, eat some cereal and go to school. Then I would go to school till three and after three it really depended on what it was I felt like doing. I was the exchange student after all, my grades didn't count here, so it was more about finding some way to entertain myself whilst simultaneously maintaining a productive mentality. So, I ended up joining Ryan for a series of mandatory school events (mandatory for him, not for me, so no doubt I looked like the biggest nerd in grade 10).

On Thursday, there was a career evening at Bergford which the two of us attended, and besides the third lecture which was held by an educational psychologist whose main goal seemed to be sending the audience into a deep sleep, the evening ended up being rather interesting and even, I dare say, fun. That being said, my interest was of course not purely career driven, in fact the three girls that decided to go night skinny dipping in the water polo pool while oblivious to the multiple cameras watching them, would certainly turn out to be the highlight of everyone's evening. Though I wasn't there to see it and would only learn about their grave miscalculation the following day at assembly, I'm sure that the people watching the tapes probably had a pretty good time, and their fun was also my fun.

And so Friday had suddenly come with its usual sudden abruptness, and as the last two hours of school stretched on, I grew increasingly nervous about the upcoming weekend. I knew what I wanted to do, or at least I thought I did. Whispers were traveling through the air like a wildfire on a hot summers day. *Mia's party. Should be cool. It's not really who is going, it's more like who isn't going?*

I looked around at people who could maybe help me to get invited. Aka, scoured the crowd for the stereotypical popular kids like a peasant searching for a potato in winter. In Berlin I wouldn't have hesitated but rather approached the host for an invite. But what if *here* that was a weird thing to do? I didn't even really know who Mia was, so it was going to be a little weird, right? *Ugh*, I groaned. So many things to worry about, what was the point in even going out at all?

As I accepted my fate in that I was going to have to sit this one out, I realized rather suddenly, with no lack of dread that my only other option for the evening would be to tag along

with Ryan and Ariana, his girlfriend, to the cinema or God knows where else it was that teenage couples went to on a Friday evening in spring.

I groaned and buried my head into my arms. This sucked, majorly. But it was also completely out of my control.

“Are you coming around to Mia’s tonight?” asked a rough voice coming from my right side. I looked in the direction of the source and pretended that it hadn’t startled me. *Stanley*? No, he didn’t look like a Stanley. *Gordon*? Again, not really a Gordon.

“Adrian, right?” I asked, relatively sure I had managed to find the name that I was looking for. He nodded, looking slightly bemused as he glanced over at Mr. Willard to make sure we were still at liberty to talk freely.

“Are you coming tonight?” he asked again.

So, I guess there you have it, the proof that a third higher power does exist in the universe, and every now and then it’ll gift you something like this, an opportunity. Be ready for when your time comes, and take it, don’t be modest. Take the opportunity and say thank you later.

“The thing is, I haven’t actually been invited. Do you think you could get me invited, or at least introduce me to Mia, so I could invite myself?” I asked politely.

Adrian seemed to ponder for a few long uncomfortable moments, until I noticed Mr. Willard looking over at us with raised eyebrows. I gulped before hastily grabbing a pen and pretending to write something on my blank piece of paper. The silence took hold for a minute or two before Adrian spoke again, this time in more of a coarse whisper.

“Sure dude. I’ll introduce you straight after English. Also, you’ll need a lift, she lives in Constantia. Where do you live?” he asked, eyes constantly shifting between me and Mr. Willard.

“Rondebosch. What’s that, like a five-minute drive?” I asked, unbeknownst to how stupid my question was for anyone aware of basic Cape Town geography.

Adrian chuckled and shook his head. “More like half an hour buddy. Don’t worry though, I’ll ask Layla if she can lift you. She’s already taking a couple of people, so it should be fine.”

I smiled again. “Thank you so much my man, it really means a lot. I wasn’t really looking forward to third wheeling with Ryan and Ariana!” I held out my hand to go in for a handshake and was slightly embarrassed when Adrian looked away leaving my arm awkwardly hanging in a space unoccupied by either space or time. He looked back and saw my arm still swaying. He laughed.

“Awe bro it’s no problem. Follow me when class is done. Tonight, we’ll jol hard.” He grabbed my hand and shook it with a manly ferocity.

*Awe and jol?* What on earth did he mean? As I would discover later, jol meant to party, and awe was a word used for agreement. Regardless, I would not be spending the evening awkwardly holding hands with myself while Ryan and Ariana aggressively made out with each other. No, I was actually going to a party.

---

“Well what do you wear when you go out?” I asked Ryan who wasn’t really giving valuable input while fixated on the Assassins Creed game playing behind me.

We were in my bedroom, four hours or so after school had ended, and the time was edging slowly closer to my departure for the party. Ryan was on my bed talking absolute shit, giving off a lot of useless comments which weren’t really helping me decide on what to wear. I had showered and washed my hair for the second time that day, scrubbed my body with body lotion to treat my relatively dry skin, and with the coconut fruit blend shower gel and Old Spice deodorant I had applied, I must have smelled like something you’d find in a five-star resort in Jamaica, probably on a silver platter. Fruity and zesty.

“I usually wear a suit when I go out” replied Ryan, totally serious.

“Are you joking?” I asked, just to make sure I wasn’t reading him wrong.

“Not in the slightest. Everybody wears suits at the parties in Cape Town” he replied sharply.

I looked at him again. “How often do you actually go out in a month, Ryan?” I asked suspiciously.

He swayed his eyes back and forth, seemingly pretending to think it over in his head before answering me.

“Not more than once” he confessed, his cheeks flushing red as he realized he wasn’t really an expert on parties in South Africa. Ryan was more of a, stay home on the weekend and play Xbox till he passed out, kind of guy. And when he did go out, he didn’t exactly jol the hardest.

“Why don’t you go out more?” I asked, already having forgotten that this had been one of our first conversations together.

“Because I don’t feel like going out every weekend with the sole purpose in mind to drink and smoke till my body decays. That’s all they do here, every weekend the same thing; they get

trashed and wake up the next morning feeling like shit trying desperately to remember who it was they hooked up with the night before. It's sad" he answered.

"So mainly you don't go, because you don't want to drink or smoke and you feel like you need to do that in order to have a good time?" I paused, allowing him to start his protest of my analysis before I cut him off. "Besides I doubt that *all* the parties in South Africa are like that. Half the people I've met seem like they'd much rather have a relaxed evening with close friends than getting absolutely smashed." Oh how wrong I would turn out to be, lol.

"Well then you don't know these people as well as you thought you did. Trust me, I may be overexaggerating, I'll give you that, but let's have this same discussion tomorrow after your night out, and we'll see if I was so wrong with all of my assumptions!" His tone was serious, tense as it always was when he got into an argument, so I thought I'd just ignore it and figure it out for myself.

"More importantly however, if you are right, I should probably be looking for a girl to hook up with tonight, right? I mean, if it is that easy and everyone's trashed..." I trailed off, giving Ryan a sly look to say I meant business.

He looked me up and down, his eyes rolling over what must have been the fourth or fifth outfit I'd tried on since coming out of the shower. "You don't really look like the kind of guy who goes for random hook ups, bro" he stated simply, a belittling smile etching its way across his face.

"I'll have you know that I am a player my friend. I look every bit like a guy who-" I started, curtly being interrupted by Ryan who was not having my bullshit performance.

"Anyways, aren't you chising Emily?" he asked me, tiredly forcing his eyes to focus back on the game he was playing.

I said nothing at first, rather reminding myself of what chise even meant. I mean it was easy enough, you derive the word from what I could only logically assume would be the verb to chase, and then you get chise, a word used in most every conversation taking place between people in my age group. It essentially meant to court someone, and if you were flirting with someone and giving them all those *signs* there are for letting someone know you liked them, then you were indeed chising them.

So, was I chising Emily? It was a good question, and if I'd actually been a player at any point in my life, or if I'd even just understood females to a certain extent, then surely, I would have stopped Ryan flat in his tracks and remarked that *of course* I was chising Emily, but man's gotta

hunt if you know what I mean? Or at least, I'm assuming that that's what a douche bag would say, not being one makes it hard to write as if I were one, but ultimately, I can imagine someone saying that. It's not that far-fetched, but if you are a douche bag and offended by my portrayal of douche bags, feel free to contact me. I probably won't reply.

But back to Ryan's question; it incorporated a lot of things, some clear and some not so much. Since meeting Emily, I had essentially, added her on Facebook along with thirteen other people from Bergford to make it seem less suspicious, and consequently started chatting to her every day in hopes of having her fall madly in love with my undeniably sexy way of writing (I mainly send memes in courtship, given that the work is already done, and they're generally socially accepted as being hilarious).

So, I mean objectively speaking, yes, I was chising Emily. But I now struggled to admit that, given that earlier that day I had been notified by Ryan's girlfriend, Ariana, that although Emily thought I looked good, apart from looking at me she was not interested. Yes, that was actually said to me and I'm not even paraphrasing. Surely that contradicts every single law of attraction? If you're attracted to someone then are you not consciously accepting that you would at least spend time with that person based purely on their appearance?

Fuck it, no one actually knows what something that someone said to another someone actually means. I took AP Psychology for a year probably in hopes of figuring it out and I'm no closer to the answer than you, my beautiful reader. So there, I just wanted to put it out there, because it is kind of funny.

"Well, look, I thought I was chising her. I'd like to chise her. But having, 'He's hot, but I'm not really interested', used as a sincere way to describe me, is a bit of a blow to the gut. What does that even mean? She hardly knows me after five days. And I mean what about laws of attraction? You would think if she thought I looked good that she'd at least give me a chance to prove myself." I said, turning back to Ryan.

"Give you a chance to *prove* yourself? What are you a knight in shining armor? Will you joust for your lady?" bellowed Ryan, bursting into a fit of laughter. I rolled my eyes at him. Yes, we were making jokes, but Ryan had a habit of allowing his jokes to become a little harsh. He had trouble reading the crowd I guess, as I, his crowd did not really need jokes about my inability of chising, to boost my confidence, for chising. I mean read that out loud. That doesn't make sense does it? It's pretty much counterproductive in its entirety.

“No, I’m not going to joust, you asshole. If she gives me a chance, maybe has an actual conversation with me, then things would be very different,” I looked at him again with an obvious unsureness in my voice, “I think at least. Don’t you think I can do it?” I asked.

He turned his head from the TV yet again and looked straight at me, his eyes softening as he smiled a brotherly smile.

“Of course I think you can do it, Arlo. But I also think you need to realize that you are pretty much the classic definition of a *hopeless* romantic. Even if you don’t want to joust for Emily, if someone said you needed to get on a horse and joust with a rose clenched between your teeth, you’d do it *and* think it’s normal.” He laughed out loud before continuing, obviously aware that he’d struck gold with the jousting joke.

“And because you are the way you are, please hook up with someone tonight. If you don’t you can sleep on the street” I knew he was kidding due to the wink he flashed me, but I wanted to believe him, that he would kick me out if I failed. Hook up with someone or regret it for the next three months. While sleeping on the street. I nodded my head vigorously, acknowledging the severity of the situation. Yeah, I should probably try my best to hook up with someone.

“Arlo,” Stephans voice rang throughout the house, “Could you come downstairs please?” I turned one last time to face Ryan and pulled on my sweater. I gave him a quick hug and promised I’d try my best before checking myself out in the mirror one last time. I looked good and I looked fresh, so, I went downstairs and arrived in the dark and unsuspecting hallway. The lights were out, and the only sign of life was coming from the kitchen.

“I’m in here” shouted Stephan from within the kitchen. I walked through the doors not exactly sure what to expect.

Stephan stood behind the dining table with both hands on his hips and his chin pointed high. On the table stood a lonely pint glass on an equally lonely coaster for companionship, filled with something that looked like beer. I looked at the glass, then back at Stephan, slightly confused and a little unsure of what to make of the situation.

“Arlo, you are a German, and, Germans drink a lot of beer. So, I want you to do me this favor and drink my beer. Give me your honest opinion, be brutally honest, and give me the whole run down if you like it or not. What can we do better?” I stood silently for a few moments glancing back and forth between the beer and Stephan. I looked at him again. And one more time. He wasn’t joking, or if he was he was hiding it ridiculously well. So, what was this, a test to check if my

intentions for the evening we pure and PG13? Or was it worse and he genuinely wanted my opinion even though beer was potentially my least favorite beverage out of *all* the beverages in existence? I mean Stephan brewed beer for a living so it wasn't absurd that he just wanted an opinion, but I couldn't help but feel sketched out by the situation.

I gingerly lifted my hand towards the glass. The distance between the point of origin and its destination became shorter by the second and as I finally placed my hand around the glass and lifted the beer, Stephens's expression stayed exactly the same, grin on his face and a supportive gleam in his eye. I placed the glass to my lips and took a sip. The liquid filled into my mouth and hit my taste buds like a tsunami. Fruit. The first thing I tasted was fruit. Which is a bit strange when you're accustomed to traditional German beers, not Cape Town craft beers.

"It tastes quite fruity" I noted, still looking at Stephan to see if I was on the right path. His expression never faltered and so I took another sip. More fruit, and a hint of smokiness perhaps?

"It's like a blend of Guinness with fruit," I said, genuinely enjoying the taste as it played around inside my mouth. "It tastes very good." I hastily added, eager to please my newly acquired host father.

He nodded, his eyes beaming with pride.

"That's what I always say, Guinness with a hint of fruitiness! You must have some with the chicken when it's ready, they complement each other surprisingly well" he said as he walked towards the oven to check on the chicken. My stomach suddenly groaned as the evening menu of chicken, chips and craft beer sounded far too good to miss out on.

And then the doorbell rang as though to lead me from temptation, and everything that followed afterwards sort of happened in a haze, very fast and sudden, too quick to follow, too quick to process. I placed the glass back down on its coaster, wiped the small fragments of foam from my mouth, and quickly approached the front door calling out to Stephan as I left.

"I'll see you later Stephan. Thanks so much for the beer, enjoy your evening." I exited the house, filled with anticipation. This was no doubt going to be a night to remember, and sometimes, on days when the blues of my youth catch up with me, I wish to be taken back to that night, just to do it all over again, exactly the same way.

## Chapter 5: Stumbling and mumbling

“Hey Arlo!” Emily threw her arms around me and squeezed a little. I was breathless. She looked as drop dead gorgeous as ever.

Moments ago, we had arrived at Mia’s house in Constantia, and as the seven of us hopped out of Layla’s mother’s Range Rover, we were pleasantly greeted by Mia and several other girls, Emily being one of them. Each of us greeted the people already present and as we went inside the greetings not only continued but increased in quantity.

I saw Adrian and thanked him for his help in getting me here. Scarlett was there, James was there, Justin was there, Mia of course was there. All people I had already met before. And then there were people who I didn’t know. All coming together and dancing and talking and, from what I saw all around me, a fair bit of drinking.

Although being sixteen in Germany, considering you don’t have a heart condition like Ryan, does imply that you drink beer, wine and champagne simply because it’s legal, doesn’t necessarily mean that you drink *a lot*. In fact, if you’re me that’s exactly what it means. I just never got into the whole, getting smashed to alter your perception of the atmosphere around you, kind of phase. Which I see now is ironic, given that I did indirectly defend such behavior in front of Ryan. Regardless, I decided not to hold a prejudice given that I’d only really been drunk once in my life and it hadn’t exactly been the night of my life.

For my sixteenth birthday I got a new phone, a new computer and a deadly concoction of Vodka, Sangria and whatever else was in the drink I was drinking that fateful evening. May the 9<sup>th</sup> would never quite be the same again, not with the crisp memory of me emptying the contents of my stomach at two in the morning, onto my friend’s lawn while pretending I was trying to clean up his balcony. To this day, I still think he doesn’t know. This might not be a fitting way to tell him, but I guess I just did.

As I stood there awkwardly in this strange environment, not sure what to do next, Scarlett happened upon me out of nowhere and took me by the arm.

“Arlo! Come with me to take shots!” she giggled as she spoke, as if she was in on some huge practical joke being played while I was the unsuspecting victim. But that’s not at all what it felt like. In fact, I felt like I wanted to go with her and take shots, something I would normally never do. And boy, that’s when it hit me. *Women can be, very, very persuasive*, especially when

you're a 16-year-old virgin who writes books in his free time. Oh, shit wait, that was a bit too truthful, pretend I didn't say anything, it's a bit self-deprecating.

Anyways, I blindly followed her into the abyss not thinking much or reading into what was going on, not because I was clever or cool, but because I just didn't get what was actually going on here. It's hardly a clue when the most affection you've received from another human being, is from your mother and so here I was, shit out of luck.

Scarlett had caught my eye the very first day I had seen her. I remember her sitting there in Mr. Willard's English classroom, that innocent look of sudden realization that she had become the brunt of a teacher joke. She was a bit like a fairy, filled with this pure and unadulterated goodness. It pulled me.

Despite the pull, I had only spoken to her once, and that one time had produced everything but a constructive introduction to the character which made up Scarlett. I knew, close to nothing about her, and that which I did know was hardly anything. So, nothing. To cut it short I knew nothing about her.

We arrived at the kitchen table, or I assumed rather that it was the kitchen table given the massive metallic fridge positioned directly behind where I was standing. Different bottles filled with different types of alcohol were standing on the table, there were spillages here and there and at the bottom end of the table, gleaming in the stark light were fourteen unused shot glasses standing tall, silently waiting for their chance to be used.

Scarlett grabbed six of the glasses and took one of the bottles without hesitation. She started filling each of the glasses then looked up at me.

“Do you drink a lot in Germany?” she asked, giggling to herself as she touched my arm. I looked back at her. There was something strange about the way she was looking at me.

“All the time. I’m usually drunk the whole weekend just because I can be” I lied. Are you getting it yet? I literally thought that making a joke about me being an alcoholic, could be a *good thing*. And I’m not even that dumb, but with females, I was on the slow train for sure, I’m just hoping that now at age 20, that the train might actually leave the station at some point.

“What is this?” I asked, beckoning at the bottle.

“It’s caramel Vodka. It’s soooo good!” she exclaimed, again brushing her hand on my arm ever so slightly. I looked at her again. Still that same look. A sly smile and her eyes were constantly blinking.

I shrugged my shoulders and started drinking. Five of the shots were down when she stopped me. She was laughing uncontrollably and gently touching my arm again.

“Those were for four other people you chum!” I looked dumbfounded.

“Yeah I knew that?” I said stupidly, my tone giving me away as a fraud. She laughed even harder, shaking her head and gently slapping my arm.

Then it dawned on me. Why would four people be drinking so little? I mean I wasn’t exactly a heavy-weight, in fact I was a complete and utter light-weight but one shot of Vodka a person didn’t seem like a lot. Maybe it was like 20 Rand a shot, and I’d just drunken 100 Rand of liquid money. That would have been funny.

“What percentage is the Vodka?” I asked, ready to tell a joke about that *very* expensive alcohol I had just consumed.

“It’s 80%. It’s not really Vodka! You’re getting absolutely shitfaced tonight” she laughed even harder, tears springing to her eyes. And then, I didn’t find it so funny anymore. At least I didn’t in the moment, but for the purposes of a good story, holy shit yes, getting accidentally drunk was the best possible thing that could have happened. And I had to go along with it, that was the funniest part. I was way too proud to take a trip to the bathroom and throw that stuff up.

I gulped and looked back at Scarlett, the slight look of horror clear on my face. She simply couldn’t control herself. The laughing continued and simply wouldn’t stop. And then the touching. She kept touching my arm.

And then it hit me. How could it have taken so long? Scarlett was definitely flirting with me, I mean she had been for the past five minutes as well, but the Arlo Female Knowledge Train was only now getting the all clear for departure. Not a bother, as the Deutsche Bahn always says, better late than never.

“Let’s dance,” I said, a little nervous as to what to expect in terms of a reaction, as I took her by the arm and led her to the dancefloor. Asking a girl to dance wasn’t exactly saying anything, but it was like me testing the waters. Luke warm would be good, icy cold would be bad. If the proposition was well received I would consider stepping further into the water. Luke warm. If it was not well received I would simply get out of the water and look for other opportunities/waters to *go for a swim in* so to speak. Icy cold.

The music was blaring as we approached the crowd of fifteen or so people, dancing to the music in an assortment of... moves? I guess you would call them moves. You had what Evan liked

to call the White Boy dance, which was basically just stomping either your right leg and your right arm or your left leg and your left arm at the same time. Your head could be bopping simultaneously if you were a natural, and all together the dance had a reputation for making you look a little like a spastic having an epileptic attack. Not really a pretty sight, not really a pretty dance, but yet there was always one white dude going at it in full swing.

And then of course you had that group of five or six girl's twerking, somewhere in a corner of the dancefloor irrespective of what music was playing and irrespective of who was watching and when they were watching. I liked to call those girls, the booty mashup clan. Maybe I should have copyrighted it, or easier still, just change the title of my book to; Booty Mashup Clan. Objectively, that probably would sell a lot better than whatever I'll come up with, but I also feel uncomfortable putting my name on anything where it is read in conjunction with the sentence, Booty Mashup Clan.

I led Scarlett to the center of the dancefloor and I guess you could say that we started dancing? I mean we weren't waltzing, no shit, but I do like to think we were doing a better job than the other two groups on the dance floor (white guys and the booty mashup clan), and I quickly grew more confident with how I was moving. That was the pre-effect of the so called caramel Vodka. That was still fine. Then came the, manipulation/no fucks given/I'll do anything right now if you think it's a good idea, phase. *That one* really took its toll.

And although even now, the memories I have of this particular night are broken, unfulfilled and kind of confusing, I will try to retell them from this point in time, as best as I possibly can. What I'm trying to say is that from this point onwards, reality was double as blurred as before and it's quite possible that I made some of this up. What can I say, it happens.

Scarlett and I danced for what seemed to me like centuries, later being confirmed as ten exhaustion filled minutes. The energy was suddenly draining from me, the dizziness was getting to be almost unbearable and yet I didn't feel, even the slightest unwell. In fact, I felt great! I felt like I could dance the whole night through and still go on when the sun came up. That feeling of invincibility, that feeling of knowing you can accomplish whatever it is you *really* want in life. That was the ultimate power for me. And as it seemed at that point in time, I was going to remain invincible for at least a few more hours, which was nice because it meant I didn't need to drink more or start doing cocaine, both viable options to maintaining that feeling. I'm kidding, I'm kidding. Gosh, the coke was already gone by the time I arrived, don't be ridiculous.

After the ten minutes were up, Scarlett took hold of my arm and pulled me back into the kitchen to meet some new arrivals. At first, I didn't want to, I wanted to tell her that I wanted to stay and dance with her a little while longer. But I couldn't. I simply couldn't say no to her. And although yes, that was a scary thing to be experiencing for the first time I also found it weirdly thrilling. This girl could make me do whatever she wanted!

And you know what, I'm really glad I don't give off slave vibes because Scarlett would have had no problems ordering me around for the rest of the night and putting a collar around my neck. Hmm. That doesn't sound right. This is becoming more and more like I'm trying to come out as being submissive, but I swear to you, yes.

We walked at what felt like snail's pace times -2, and when we finally made it to the kitchen I distinctively remember multiple hands, clasping my hand over and over again and me just saying *yeah dude* and *sure dude* and *awe dude*. I think they must have gotten the point eventually. They were all my dudes no matter who they were, but if I'm to be more exact about it, it probably went a little more like this:

"Hey brah I'm Kevin" said one of the newbies, dressed in a checkered shirt and dark brown chinos. I wouldn't exactly label him as a fashion guru, nor would I label him as a fashion God. But one thing he knew how to do was dress appropriately and dress appropriately well. Both those things he did.

"I'm Arlo" I said, trying carefully not to stumble over my words, or to stumble over the floor. I wasn't quite sure how well I was doing but it didn't seem like Kevin was judging me all too much.

"Is there something to drink here, brah?" asked Kevin, looking straight at me.

*Drink*. That word sounded vaguely familiar. I looked around. The bottles had been relocated from the kitchen table back into the cupboards they had come from. But, I knew a secret. I knew that people put alcohol into the freezer to keep it nice and yummy. I knew where the freezer was. *Piece of cake* I thought to myself bringing myself to the freezer and wrenching it open.

"You're going to like this stuff!" I exclaimed as I grabbed hold of the bottle of 80% whatever it was. "Trust me". I honestly can't say if I was trying to get him as shitfaced as me, but if I was trying to, I would have definitely been nailing it.

Kevin pretended to read the label for a moment, then shrugged his shoulders and poured himself and his friend a glass.

“I’m Alexander” said Kevin’s friend, stretching out his hand to shake mine. I gladly accepted and shook it, probably a little too hard as Alexander’s surprised face expression gave way, leaving a young man that looked a little, perplexed, to say the least.

“I’m still, Arlo” I said, without even a hint of sarcasm. He laughed, unsure of what else to do and grabbed his glass. He looked back at Kevin, they toasted to each other and drank together.

“What is this?” spat Kevin. “It tastes like absolute shit.”

“It’s not caramel Vodka that’s for sure!” was the only thing I could think of to say. My world continued spinning. How I was managing to carry on a conversation with the pair of them, was a complete and utter mystery.

I looked away from Kevin and Alexander, to see if Scarlett was still accompanying me. Sure enough there she was, holding my hand, something I hadn’t seemed to notice until now. I looked at her face. Still the same look.

“Let’s go outside Arlo.” Scarlett tugged at my hand and took the lead. She directed me through the kitchen door into the garden towards the garden table. She sat me down and sat on my lap.

“Do you smoke weed?” I nodded my head and smiled a smile that was supposed to show confidence but may have ended up being quite toothy. And then it hit me what she had asked. I did not smoke weed. I had *never* smoked weed. *Jesus*, I thought to myself, *I need to learn to say no.*

“All the time. When I’m not drunk in Berlin, I’m basically always high” I slurred my words. And so, the plot thickened. My humor had degraded to a level so low that all I had to offer were jokes about substance abuse. Like wow, that was way down the ladder, if you ever get to that point, trust me, you need help. Or weed.

“You should hit the pipe then! It’s really good shit apparently” said Scarlett, giggling again, holding a pipe filled with green buds to my face, barely visible in the dark of the night.

I took the pipe. I put it in my mouth and took the lighter out of Scarlett’s other hand. I started copying what I had seen in several stoner movies, lighting the herbs and burning myself in the process. I pulled deeply, holding my finger on the choke so that the smoke could build. I released my finger and inhaled, almost coughing immediately with the smoke that hit my lungs.

I didn’t smoke anything, and so this, being the first time something other than air had penetrated my lungs, I almost died from the experience. Or well, I didn’t almost die, but it is most

definitely safe to say that I coughed and coughed so much that I came pretty close to coughing out one of my lungs.

Scarlett started laughing again, throwing her arms around me and hugging me tightly.

“You’re sooo funny!” she said, batting her eyes faster than my under the influence eyes could follow.

She got up from my lap and stroked my hair.

“I’ll be back in a moment” she whispered, her eyes gleaming in the faint light of the moon. She turned around and disappeared back into the kitchen. I was slightly star struck.

Scarlett was definitely one of the most beautiful girls in my grade, if not at Bergford. After my first five days there, having only spoken to her once before, it now seemed that she *maybe* was interested in *me*. Or I was interpreting it wrong. In that case, trying anything could make things awkward, as well as dirty my reputation as the nice guy, significantly. It also begged to pose the unfortunate fact, that I was actually a nice guy and more than likely wouldn’t be able to go through with anything my invincible brain managed to conjure up.

As I waited for Scarlett to return, not quite sure how slow or fast the time was traveling, I was eventually joined by Grace and Violet, who were both part of my general group of friends at Bergford. They sat down in the two vacant chairs beside me, confused expressions clear on their faces, possibly waiting for me to say something. Silence. Definitely waiting for me to say something.

“What?” I asked, using what couldn’t really be defined as an original question for the given situation.

“Why aren’t you hooking up with Scarlett?” asked Grace simply, as if it was the most obvious thing in the world.

“Well do you think she’s interested?” I asked in return, suddenly feeling a wave of euphoria wash over me. I started laughing. Everything seemed so funny. I didn’t care much for what was going on around me, why should I? Everything was just so damn funny!

“Are you stupid?” asked Grace, her face bewildered, more than probably due to my sudden outburst of laughter.

I continued laughing as I felt my eyes beginning to tear up. Her voice sounded funny. In fact, everything about her seemed funny to me. I couldn’t help it, it just naturally occurred. Laughing had never seemed easier!

I tried to concentrate. Weed wasn't supposed to be this strong. The last time two police officers held a drug seminar at my school, they were very adamant about the fact that if you took marijuana once, you would die. And if you didn't die, you're super lucky, and don't do it again. But was weed this strong? Could it actually be killing me?

"Stupid," I repeated, nodding my head. "Stupid." Yeah, I wasn't in danger of dying.

Violet shook her head when I spoke and smiled. She knew what was up, she just had that look on her face that she knew everything, and she knew it twice.

"Look at him, Grace. He's blazed as shit. You might as well be trying to talk to a rabbit!" she exclaimed, pinching my cheeks to emphasize her point.

"Go inside and hook up with Scarlett, Arlo. She'll go with it, trust me" insisted Grace, intent on helping a brother out. I nodded my head again and smiled at her showing no signs whatsoever of getting up, let alone, moving.

"Arlo, I thought you were arrogant when I first met you. Now I know you're a cool guy so how about you get up and go inside and take Scarlett and hook up with her?" said Grace again, putting more obvious effort into her voice as if she was *trying* to manipulate me.

Unlike with Scarlett, I was now putting my foot down, I would not be so easily persuaded again and again, so I nodded and I continued nodding while smiling a big cheeky smile. But movement, *pah*, no apparent signs of movement would be made for any reason whatsoever! I had my pride too you know. And I *was* really drunk and high.

"She said she was coming back" I said, unconvinced by the words that waltzed out of my mouth.

Grace sighed and rolled her eyes. She was done trying to persuade me, and though I knew I would have enjoyed getting up and hooking up with Scarlett, it wasn't that simple. It was never that simple. Me getting up, would have required an amount of energy which I just didn't have at that exact time. "She's obviously not coming back, Arlo."

"Arlo, there's food inside where Scarlett is. If you bring her out here, you can have all the food!" said Violet. With that small sentence, I knew that Violet spent at least some time around stoners. She spoke directly with my heart and something within me *clicked* all too suddenly. I don't know what it was, and I don't know why it clicked but the sudden promise of food had my insides drooling and down on their knees. I drew upon the remains of my reserve energy and forced

myself up. I felt like a great warrior, standing up one last time to defeat my sworn enemy. Fate was on my side.

‘I’ve got this shit’ I shouted, pushing back the chair I had been sitting on, clearly trying to emphasize my point. Violet laughed and Grace looked surprised.

“How did you know that would work?” asked Grace surprised.

“I didn’t” replied Violet, chortling a little more and shaking her head. “Druggas, what can you do?”

I began my journey afresh, venturing in the direction of the kitchen door to get to the dancefloor. If Scarlett was inside and if Scarlett had the food, I decided in my drunken state that it was only natural for her to be on the dancefloor. How that made sense, I wasn’t quite sure, but with the promise of food simmered freshly into my mind I didn’t care much for what made sense and what didn’t. Scarlett had to be found. Scarlett had the food.

Vaguely aware that I was being watched from afar, I stumbled through the kitchen door and made my way through the kitchen. Bumping into only *three* unfamiliar objects on my way there, I decided it was only fair to deem the adventure to the dancefloor, a complete and utter success.

I wandered through the crowd, jumping up and down from time to time to make good use of the music. Someone had put on psychedelic trance and just as the name suggested, the music would stop me right in my tracks and force me to make some kind of movement before continuing. I wish I could say that I didn’t look lost in the crowd, in fact, I wish I could say I even managed to pass as sober, but that, would be a lie.

When I finally found Scarlett, she was standing and talking to one of the new arrivals I had been introduced to earlier on. It was, as I discovered upon further blurred inspection, Kevin.

“Hey man what’s up” I said as I headed over to the duo offering my hand for a greeting. He ignored me. He literally just ignored me and left me hanging! Or, at least I thought so, as it turned out later on he had actually greeted me, and I had been the one to leave him hanging. Yeah, I had been the dick in the situation, there really was a first time for everything.

I looked at Scarlett still under the impression that Kevin had ignored me. I wasn’t going to leave her there with some asshole, I was way too proud to just allow such unjustice.

“Do you want to come outside with me?” I asked her, remembering what Violet had said.

She looked at me suspiciously, seemingly deciding whether or not she wanted to go with me. I looked for that familiar look, that familiar glow she had been expressing to me so much earlier on. Nothing. There was none of that. Just a blank expression.

“I think I’m happy right here” she replied, not even giggling a little bit.

Icy cold. The water was Icy cold. Get out of there Arlo, just leave it and go. The train has literally blown up and there’s plenty of other pools to swim in, just not this one.

“Are you sure you don’t wa-” I tried, not wanting to sound desperate but unsurprised if that’s exactly what it sounded like.

“I’m fine right here” she said, interrupting me with a reassuring tone. She smiled sheepishly and patted me on the shoulder. If that wasn’t a ‘friendzone’ sign, I don’t know what was.

I took the final sign and turned around, readying myself to return to my benefactors, empty handed without Scarlett and without the food. I hoped they wouldn’t be disappointed, but I think deep down I knew that they would only feel sorry for me.

I started stumbling back in the direction I knew I needed to go and half way across the dance floor I decided to risk a look back. I admit now, I shouldn’t have done it, I admit now, it was pointless to look back. But I did it anyways, and now when I come to think of it, *that* was my greatest upset.

Back where Scarlett and Kevin had been standing, were now the shapes of two bodies totally entangled. As my eyes focused and I concentrated harder, I saw that it was in fact Scarlett and Kevin, only now they weren’t talking, they were exploring the insides of each other’s mouths. My heart plummeted within my chest as the feelings of rejection were multiplied by the alcohol in my bloodstream.

I turned away from the sorry sight, intent on reaching Grace and Violet to tell them I had failed. They had to know. They were the only ones who could comfort me now, dark thoughts were already circling within my head.

Run, Arlo run. I escaped the dancefloor and arrived back at the outdoor table, plonking myself down on my favorable chair.

Grace and Violet stopped their conversation. They both turned towards me, quizzical looks fixated, eager to hear my story.

“Where’s Scarlett?” asked Grace, oblivious to what I thought must have been obvious.

“Kevin. Didn’t feel like coming outside anymore” I said, scowling at the pipe lying forgotten on the table. This was the fault of the pipe. My rejection could only be blamed on the pipe.

“Don’t worry man, there’ll be other girls” interjected Violet, her voice soothing and comforting. “Besides, you have another three months here, don’t you?”

I nodded. I felt better already. What did it matter if I hooked up with someone or not? Going out wasn’t about that. I smiled stupidly. The euphoria returned stronger than before, easier to control, but still making me feel like depression was just a word without a meaning.

I laughed. “It’s almost Christmas time” There was a pause as Grace and Violet looked at each other, wondering simply, what to make of me.

They joined in the laughter, shaking their heads at my weird and wonderful train of thought.

“It’s almost Easter as well” said Grace, adding to the gag.

“The time really flies!” said Violet sarcastically. And before I got caught up with the whole concept of sarcasm and why it was so hilarious, the same thing that clicked in me earlier, clicked in me again as a further realization came to me very suddenly and very vividly.

*Time.* What time was it? Wasn’t I getting picked up soon?

Shit. I pulled my phone out of my pants pocket to check the time: 23:55. I was getting picked up in five short minutes. Panic struck me ever so slightly, only to be shot down and defeated by the happy thoughts pulsing through my brain. Nothing could upset me now, I simply didn’t give a shit anymore.

I got up, slightly swaying here and there, but for the most part having regained the majority of my bodily control again, much to my delight. How had four hours passed so quickly? Was I missing memories from the night or had I passed out somewhere along the line? Again, these worries slowly dissolved into my mind, as I thought of Unicorns and comfortable mattresses. Happiness was indeed, a wonderful thing.

“Bye Grace, bye Violet. Cheers for cheering me up.” I hugged both of the girls goodbye and thanked them again. “See you in school.”

I walked in what I allow myself to define as, a relatively straight line, through the kitchen and through the dancefloor till I arrived at the front door. I didn’t pause once. Not to dance and not to find Scarlett. Looking back was a thing of the past. Looking back was something I didn’t have time for. And was also way too cross-faded for.

At the front door, standing big, and bulging and tall, hands on his hips was Mia's father. As it looked to the common eye, it seemed that he was standing there to make sure everyone was getting home ok. Respectable parent figure, nothing wrong with that.

To me on the other hand, it looked rather as if he was standing there, throwing a watchful eye over the things people came and went with. He obviously wasn't too fond of the idea of some 16-year-old delinquent stealing any family heirlooms that had been passed down for centuries.

I shook his hand and thanked him, complimenting his house and saying how grateful I was for him having me. He wished me the best of luck for my adventures to come and buzzed the door open with a remote. As I placed my hand on the door to the road, I heard a shout behind me, forcing me to look.

"Let me out! I couldn't find the bathroom" shouted a boy I didn't recognize with plain desperation clear in his voice.

"Now hold it there son, just calm down and I'll let you out in a minute. The bathroom's this way" said Mia's father calmly, gently trying to diffuse the tension.

The boy looked lost, not sure which way to go, or which way was right. He looked around crazily hoping that someone would liberate him from the sticky situation, but there was no one in sight, no one who could have made it on time. Because then he puked. Onto Mia's dad's jersey the smell traveling so fast and so ferociously that it hit me within seconds, despite the 15-meter distance gap between us. It all happened so fast.

I gagged. For a moment all was still. Then Mia's dad bellowed, his voice filled with rage and his eyes shining with hatred.

"EVERYONE GET OUT NOW, OR I'M CALLING THE COPS!" he shouted, his voice sharp as a knife whizzing through the air. Kids started scrambling, the culprit who had puked was even crawling out of the door desperately attempting to escape the danger.

And that's the last I saw of that party. A perhaps, 16-year-old crawling around in his own vomit, desperate for escape, desperate for some normality. It certainly was an eventful evening.

But it wasn't only eventful. Apart from one or two depressing hiccups throughout the course of the evening, I had had a great time, *everyone else* seemed to have had a great time, and as I would discover the following day thanks to Facebook messenger and my very smooth questioning, Emily had not hooked up with anyone on this fateful night. Luke warm, proceed with caution.

---

## Chapter 6: Further invitations

I spotted Evan standing tall in the center of founder's field, hovering above the rest of his friends, swooning like an eagle unsure whether to flock down or fly. It was something I'd noticed during the first week. It sometimes seemed as though Evan was a restless person, always on high alert, though why, I can't really tell you. It was more like he was just ready for action. But all the time, even during these lunch hours where surely nothing worth his attention could be happening.

As I approached the group stealthily, not wanting to attract too much attention to myself, I scanned the faces one by one, searching for Scarlett. It wasn't quite as if I was full on ignoring her, but something did tell me that we would both be happy with a mutual agreement of never ever talking about the events of that Godawful evening. Like never ever.

Maybe one day, we could laugh about it, laugh about the futilities of the human youth, laugh about my tireless efforts. Maybe, we could have a look back over events that took place three years ago while slurping on a perfect cappuccino on a sunny day, and simply laugh about it all. Maybe we could do that, or also never.

Spotting her at last at the distant end of the group, I quickly evaluated the risk/reward factor for making a great migration over to Evan. Upon deeming it a safe and worthy cause, I nonchalantly skipped over to him, which probably didn't look at all nonchalant, but more like I had something long and pointy shoved in my behind.

"How was your weekend?" I asked, bumping my fist with his and giving him a warm smile. The sun was shining, the trees were blossoming, the mountains looked picturesque and the sky was clear. Oh, and I was with good company. Of all the things I could be doing wrong in the world, smiling was most definitely not one of them.

"I think I read so much that at multiple times I forgot to take care of business, if you know what I mean?" said Evan. I did not know what he meant, so I stayed silent waiting for his answer. "Well you gotta shit, piss and wank at some point, even if you're lost in a good book, my friend." He smiled as I started laughing, shaking my head at the certain brutality of his jokes.

"Why didn't you go to Mia's party on Friday? Couldn't you have taken care of business there?" I asked, only now remembering that he hadn't been there the entire evening. Despite having used the argument that most of my newfound friends seemed keener on an evening of reading rather than a booze filled night of regret, I hadn't thought it was true. Especially not with Evan, I mean the guy seemed like he was always, everywhere, if that makes sense.

Evan laughed and shook his head. “Of all the places I can picture pleasuring myself, Mia’s house is not one of them,” he paused before clenching his teeth together in slight embarrassment, “My mom didn’t let me go because she grounded me.”

“She grounded you?” I asked surprised. That was a thing parents did in South Africa? Grounding their children. Wasn’t that like the most American thing possible to do? “Wait, why only you? Wasn’t Emily at the party?” I asked, forgetting who I was speaking to in a moment of insanity. Evan only laughed and rolled his eyes.

“*Remarkable* that you would notice that my sister was there” he said. “Did you do anything else? Apart from staring at her for the entire evening, I mean?”

“Oh, piss off man” I replied, rolling my eyes and stretching my smile. He laughed again, apparently delighted with my reaction before putting on a more serious expression.

“You know I’m just teasing you. See, what people don’t understand about me, probably because they can’t rationalize it with their standard definition of brotherly love, is that I don’t really give a shit about what Emily gets up to. If she falls on her face, I’ll be there. Not to pick her up at first, but to tease her about it and remind her how stupid she was. Then I’ll pick her up, because that way she’ll learn, as well as not needing to be dependent on me. If I helped her with *every little* situation, why would she even try to do anything alone?” I could only nod, not really wanting to offer an opinion after only knowing them both for a little more than seven days. He seemed to have an in depth understanding of his sister that no one else could ever hope to comprehend, and though his treatment often seemed like very tough love, he was right that Emily was completely independent from him. She never asked for his help and she never took it when it was offered. It was one of the character traits I’d come to be most impressed by.

“As for the party situation, my mom didn’t let me go because on Friday after school, I went to the gym, apparently without telling her beforehand. So, because I didn’t ask for permission to go exercise, I was fucking grounded,” he flung up his hands in mock shock, “Well, no, OK, I was grounded after I pointed out that the reason she was upset with me was a complete logical fallacy in itself, and that she couldn’t expect me to take her seriously if going to the gym was going to be taboo.”

I laughed. I mean it was probably mean to laugh, having a kid like Evan who’s pretty much constantly seeping his intelligence everywhere he goes, cannot be an easy job for a mother. Especially in terms of arguments. But then again, I don’t really know what happened, all I know

is a singular side of the story. What I do know, however, is that Evan made it sound hilarious, and I'm glad I'd bothered asking about it in the first place.

"So, what happened then?" I asked.

"What do you think? I retired to my bedroom and took a shit in my bathroom. Then I read my book and didn't see much of her till this morning" he said simply, ensuring me that this was the only way to deal with an unreasonable mother. I laughed again.

"Well after that story, I can't wait to meet your mother, you've certainly awoken my interest" I said, only half joking.

"Well, why don't you come to my house today?" he asked.

"I mean, this is a bit spontaneous, but... Well, are you sure it'd be OK? I don't want to impose or anything" I said. Evan shook his head.

"Definitely man. It's so chilled, I want you to come. Just tell Ryan's mom to pick you up at my place when Ryan's done with orchestra. My house is literally on the way if you're coming from school."

I played with the thought in my head for a bit, before coming to realize the obvious. Firstly, I had nothing better to do. That's not supposed to sound harsh, it's just that I genuinely had zero other plans, at least for the foreseeable future. Secondly, I liked Evan a lot, he was a cool guy, we had similar interests, and I was kind of interested to meet his mom.

But then of course thirdly, my treacherous mind had to remind itself that Emily would also be at Evan's house, given that they're kind of siblings or whatever. And I liked Emily, a lot, and I wanted to change her mind about me and I wanted to show her the world and this and that. So yeah, I guess that also had something to do with my end decision.

"Alright, sick, let's do it!" I said.

Evan smiled again. "You just realized my sister also lives in my house, didn't you? Your eyes give away a lot, my friend. Consider wearing sunglasses!" I blushed almost instantaneously, not quite knowing what to say before Evan spoke again. "I'm going to have a lot of fun with these jokes before we both get bored of them. Anyways, I'm hungry, let's go to the vending machines for a little snack, ey?"

I nodded my head, still awkwardly smiling as we started heading towards the vending machines. Luckily a distraction quickly presented itself, and though I still don't know why I

actually chose to get involved, something within me knew that the war had already begun, and that it was now up to me to win every upcoming battle with as little casualties as possible.

“Isn’t that Ms. Cliffords?” I asked Evan as we turned around the corner of the tall white music building. Evan followed my gaze and nodded.

“The worst woman to ever grace the blessed ground of Bergford High School? Yeah, that’s the one” replied Evan, his words filled with obvious distaste.

We approached Ms. Cliffords slowly but surely, and I still don’t know why I spontaneously decided that the best way to win the present battle, was attacking first and dropping some bombs in the late evening. That is to say, I shouted at her in German, my own little Blitzkrieg, because at the time it seemed like a really clever thing to do. Regrettably, just like leaving the enemy on the beaches of Dunkirk, I would later find out, that it wasn’t a clever thing to do, and when the general’s inside your head advise you to do the opposite, sometimes you should definitely listen.

“Du hässliche Kuh, du kannst mich am Arsch lecken!” It was loud enough and to an extent random enough to disprove any misgivings that it may have been directed at her. I mean, it was, but the joke was only meant for me and Evan, both of us now laughing loudly, filled with that sense of knowing an inside joke while the other party didn’t. *You can kiss my ass, you ugly cow!*

“You there, boy!” sneered Ms. Cliffords. I turned around in shock. She had stopped dead in her tracks even before we’d walked past her, but never had I expected her to actually take offense. I mean, how could she? How could she know? Well, she couldn’t, so I decided to try again what I had previously failed in doing. Speaking in a calm, innocent and non-provoking manner.

“What is it ma’am. I hope I wasn’t being *loud* or anything.” I responded in what probably can be described as a condescending tone. What can I say, it was the heat of the battle that made me do it, the whole situation was out of hand the moment I opened my mouth.

“Are you trying to be cheeky, boy?” she asked. I let the question sit there for a moment or two before bothering to answer.

“That’s a hard question, ma’am.” I lowered my voice deliberately, hoping that she wouldn’t hear too well with the whistling wind behind her.

“*What did you say?*” asked Ms. Cliffords, venom now seeping through her words as though her vocabulary consisted largely of snake words and discarded skins.

“I meant to say ‘no ma’am, I’m not trying to be cheeky’” I responded louder, making sure this time that she could make no mistake of what it was I was saying. Sometimes it was important to take a critical hit to win the greater battle, and winning this battle was now absolutely essential.

She looked confused. No, confused was a drastic understatement. She looked perplexed! The kid that had just been doing everything to provoke a confrontation had suddenly been replaced by a well-mannered *lad*? Ms. Cliffords was certainly not stupid, in fact I was well aware that she was highly intelligent, but it was the first time that she’d actually needed any intelligence when dealing with a student. I mean, she knew she held all the cards, but what she couldn’t understand just yet, was why I had the balls to try and steal away the ace of spades.

“I hope you didn’t think I was rude ma’am, I was just confused why you were so angry at us, I guess I’m still a little overwhelmed with everything” I said smiling sickly, deciding that not allowing her to say another word was the best way forward from causing her confusion. And it worked, as if stunned by me, she nodded her head and said “OK”, then walked away leaving us to bustle along on our merry way.

“Well you just made yourself the perfect enemy, Arlo. I mean, no one really likes her, but I’ve never seen anyone actively try to piss her off. You must be really bored around here” said Evan, laughing, not knowing then that he’d struck a chord, because all of a sudden I started to consider it.

For maybe I didn’t think I was doing the world a service by giving her a doll to play with. In fact, maybe I just wanted some more action in my life because I knew I’d never really have to bare the consequences. And that’s a funny thought to consider, because I can honestly say that such *hostile* thoughts, had never before crossed my mind. And it leads me to ask if so much could have happened in seven days, that my melodramatic and existential teenage angst had caused me to become, an entirely new person.

And maybe that’s why Ms. Cliffords accepted my declaration of war. I sometimes give her the benefit of the doubt, that maybe she could tell that I was changing and wanted to stop that change, at some attempt to reconcile her own childhood changes. I mean, it would change her role entirely, she’d become an anti-hero, whilst also showing that though the war with her was taking place in the physical world, it was mainly a depiction of me struggling with myself, delaying a change that was inevitable from the moment I first set eyes on Bergford.

But there was a change, and it had nothing to do with her. Why should you believe me, you ask? Why should you take my word for it? Well, because when the war really kicked off, and oh my God it did, I had to accept that it was just a fantasy, and that this person I had chosen as my rival, was exactly the person I expected, and exactly the person I made her out to be.

.....

## Chapter 7: A beautiful day and a beautiful conversation

Upon receiving permission from Theresa, Ryan's mom, I went to Evan's house after school that Monday, and before I knew it the week sped by in almost a blur, with me going back to Evan's house not only once, but twice more.

Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday were spent under the guise that I was simply hanging out with my new best friend, playing PlayStation games and talking about school related social dynamics. There was, however, more to it than that. Although I can't deny that I was having an incredible amount of fun with Evan, factually, I was also trying to dismantle the emotional defenses Emily had presumably built up over the years, trying to block off anyone who might get too close. And Evan wasn't blind to it either, he just didn't seem to mind too much. Apart from the odd, "Arlo will you bloody concentrate on me for a change", he let it all play out like an intrigued bystander, probably enjoying the entertainment of my helplessness as it were.

"So why don't you like physics? Why don't you take history instead?" I asked on Wednesday, banging out yet another one of my classic conversation starters.

"Well it's because physics is like..." she started to reply, well prepared to answer my question with a full run down of the situation. It was chit chat really, nothing too personal and nothing too vague. The perfect harmony needed for any young man to start a chise. Or, so I had thought.

As my time spent with Emily increased, I began to accept more and more that I didn't really know my way around girls that well, despite me having always tried to persuade myself otherwise. I had noticed for instance, that she enjoyed my jokes, but knew when I was trying to be funny and so only laughed when she determined a lack of effort. Sounds annoying? It was infuriating.

Then on the other hand, she seemed to want to get to me know me, almost as eagerly as I wanted to get to know her, but sometimes that eagerness fell away completely and left a nothingness, as though she felt indifferent about my very existence. No bond of friendship, no passionate love. Just, nothing. As if whatever we shared were black and white.

And as mystified as I was, whether I was succeeding or failing in courting Emily, I decided to not let it bother me, and let whatever would happen, happen. Now, that may sound poetic to you, it may also sound idiotic to you, but to me it was plain and simple the best technique to get on with my exchange and enjoy the time that I had left.

So, here I was, three days later, Saturday morning, and wondering what to do with myself on such a glorious and beautiful day. The night before had been a late one, even by Ryan's standards, and we had spent it well playing Call of Duty co-op and sharing an especially cheesy pizza.

As I started getting up, I routinely glanced at my phone lying beside me, to check the time. 11:30. I wasn't surprised in the slightest. Sleeping in on Saturday mornings was an easy and manageable task when your host only woke up at 13:30 at the earliest. In fact, Ryan claimed that sleep was his very mild version of heroin and were he to wake up earlier than 13:30 on a day not consumed by school, it was pretty much completely certain that he would be showing withdrawal symptoms.

I sometimes wondered what would happen if the sun just didn't rise one day. Would Ryan open his eyes, see the darkness all around him and decide he was better off in the realm of his dreams? I shrugged my shoulders and smiled. Doing something with Ryan was, *temporarily* out of the question.

I went back to my bed and sat down, retrieving my phone from the bedside table to see if any messages awaited me. And there was one, from Evan, asking me if I wanted to join him in going to Silvermine national park. I'd been to Silvermine before, though a long time ago, and I remembered the distinct beauty of the national park, preserved around a dam in which one could swim in. So, glancing once more at the blazing sun outside my bedroom window, I decided that yes, I absolutely wanted to join him for the trip to Silvermine.

I quickly replied that I'd be on my way soon and packed my stuff together after hopping in the shower. Most parts of my brain were firing madly, obviously curious whether Emily was going to be along for this outdoor adventure, but again, I tried not to worry about it and left my bedroom to tell Theresa and Stephan my plans for the day.

"Morning Theresa, morning Stephan" I exclaimed as I walked into the kitchen.

"Morning Arlo. How did you sleep?" asked Theresa. Stephan was probably still upstairs.

"Not bad at all. Maybe a little longer than usual, but I think that might be due to Ryan's sleeping habits rubbing off on me. He is kind of a human brick, no offense intended" I said. Theresa laughed and nodded her head.

"None taken! I think you've actually hit the nail on its head there! At least when he's asleep here, I know he's not out somewhere getting himself into trouble!" It was my turn to laugh now.

Theresa had this nice warm atmosphere around her and I felt comfortable talking to her, as comfortable as I would, talking to my own mother.

“What are your plans for today?” she asked, looking out the window as she spoke, “The weather’s beautiful today!”

“It really is, that’s why I was actually wondering if you could maybe drop me off at Evan’s house, he’s going to Silvermine relatively soon and he was wondering if I wanted to come with.” I said.

Theresa nodded her head. “Sounds like a great idea, I wish I had time to go! When do you need to be there?”

“In the next half an hour, if that’s OK?” I asked, knowing very well that the request was quite presumptuous. She smiled, raising her mug to her lips.

“Of course that’s OK. If you let me finish my tea, we can go immediately” Then she paused. “Do you want to wake up Ryan to see if he wants to come out?”

“Ugh, well, to be honest I doubt he’d want to leave the house... this early.”

I didn’t really want to outright tell her that I thought her son hated the outdoors, and if the entire planet had a roof over its head he probably wouldn’t mind. To be honest, she probably already knew that. So, I said it diplomatically.

Theresa nodded again. “His loss then, it must be absolutely stunning out there” she exclaimed, taking one last look out the window before drying her hands and heading out the door. I followed close behind and got into the car, my stomach suddenly starting to twist and turn with curiosity. Unlike my brain, my stomach seemed intent on making Emily its business and if you’ve ever felt those beastly butterflies in your underbelly, you’ll know that you just can’t switch them off.

.....

The trip to Silvermine, besides the close to unbearable traffic and sweltering heat baking the insides of the car, was for the most part uneventful. On the way to our destination we made a brief stop in Pinelands, where in turn we picked up Violet, who as it turned out was going to be the only other person joining our company that morning.

Upon arrival at Evan’s house, I had made an attempt at smoothly asking if his sister was going to be joining us. I knew it wasn’t smooth when he simply rolled his eyes at me and groaned.

“Don’t you ever think of anything else?” he asked me, monotony obvious in his voice.

“I was only joking, stop taking everything so seriously, dude” I retorted unconvincingly.

“Shut up and get in the car, we can have these little arguments when you’re my brother in law. But then it’ll probably be you complaining about my sister, not constantly asking about her.” I shut up and got in the car, pleased that Evan seemed to be considering a future where I ended up as his brother in law.

As we arrived in Silvermine we were greeted by a guard in a fluorescent jacket, who waved us right through and said something about National Free Wildlife day. Our driver, Dane, who was a family friend of Evan’s, dropped the three of us off right in front of the dam, and as we waved goodbye to Dane who’d driven us all the way from Claremont, it appeared the sun was getting even hotter, making our clothes stick to our bodies.

We sat down at one of the many designated camp sites and hastily unpacked our picnic supplies. Though the sun hadn’t yet reached its peak for the day, it was hot, and after getting changed into our swimming costumes, we topped up on some water while staring across the vast body of water that lay before us.

Evan grabbed into his bag and handed Violet and me a beer. I politely accepted and stood silently, waiting for him to say something. He lifted his own bottle to the sky and spoke with an authority as though he were commanding the clouds to split apart.

“Here’s to Arlo’s exchange in South Africa; may it be wonderful and pray to God never ending!” He clinked his bottle together with ours and took a long and slow sip.

I smiled. This had been a great idea. The weather was as wonderful as the people I was with and so was the beer, which actually surprised me. It was the right concoction for a late Saturday afternoon, and I wouldn’t have wanted to be anywhere else.

“What are you guys doing tonight?” I asked. Yes, getting invited to something was probably my main intention. Congratulations, you got me.

“Aren’t you coming to Layla’s get together?” asked Evan, surprised.

“Is that tonight?” I asked

“Yeah it is. You said you were going.”

I groaned in disbelief. “I don’t even know why I try to remember things anymore. Shit goes in one ear and comes out the next!”

Evan and Violet laughed while continuing to drink.

“So, who are you going to try and hook up with tonight?” asked Violet, referring quite obviously to the Scarlett incident at Mia’s house party. My smile faded. I quickly glanced at Evan, hoping he wouldn’t say anything to deepen the color of my already red cheeks. In fact, I was hoping he’d make a joke about my failure with Scarlett, anything to keep him off the topic of...

“He wants to hook up with my sister” said Evan, smiling smugly. I groaned again. This was becoming awkward enough for me to consider jumping into the dam. Maybe if it was cold enough I could just wither away and die.

“Really Arlo?” asked Violet.

“Well I mean, I don’t really know if she’s interested. Like if she’s interested, then I guess I would try. But like I don’t know if...” I said, trailing off. If what? Did I want to hook up with her? Well yes. Would I hook up her? Well yes. But what?

I shrugged my shoulders. “I have no idea. That’s the real answer,” I said, and as soon as I’d said it, I knew it to be true. For me, for my side, it was clear. What I had no idea about, however, was the other side and if the other side was beginning to become aware of my existence. “Do you think she’s interested?” I asked, knowing it was a longshot.

Violet smiled. It turned out that she’d been gently steering me in the direction of Emily from the get go, playing me like a fiddle, hoping I’d ask her. I just hadn’t noticed.

“I think if you tried, she’d definitely be open to the idea. But, you actually need to try and I mean actually try, if you’re ever going to get anywhere with this.” Violet paused. “How far have you gone with a girl, Arlo?”

My cheeks flushed and I discovered that I had succeeded in becoming a tomato. The question wasn’t meant maliciously, but it was still uncomfortable telling the truth, especially when the truth just isn’t that sexy. So, I paused to consider whether I should just be honest but ended up settling for a variation of the truth. “To me it’s not really about going far with a girl,” I stated, choosing my words very carefully. “It’s more about enjoying their company and respecting them as a person.”

Violet eyed me carefully before streaming in to call my bluff. “Have you ever hooked up with a girl before?”

I was now an overripe, good for the boiling pot and nothing else, tomato, as all the blood in my body seemed to sprint and fill my cheeks. “Not like, really hooked up with them. It was rather more of a kiss.” I admitted, wildly embarrassed. Violet’s look of surprise made me shudder,

which I think is why I felt the need to justify myself a little. “I really have to like a girl before bothering to try anything. And I know it’s not really an excuse, but it’s kind of the way I am.”

Violet laughed. “Why are you blushing? That’s a really great thing to be able to say, I know plenty of guys who would hook up with a tree if they were drunk enough.” She stood up and walked over to give me a hug. “If you want to hook up with her, do it. But don’t go there with any expectations, because as soon as you do, and it doesn’t work out, that’s when you’ll feel the worst, my friend.”

Evan cleared his throat and both Violet and I looked up at him.

“I’ve gotten a couple of blowjobs in my life, most of them pretty good.” he said like he was talking about his average day in school. “No biggie”.

“Evan!” exclaimed Violet, slightly disgusted by his directness of words.

“What? I thought we were talking about life and sex? Or is Arlo the only one allowed to partake?” he asked, winking cheekily like the artful dodger. I laughed, shaking my head and soon the three of us were laughing together. I looked out over the dam, the still, docile dam and smiled. Perfect weather, perfect company and I guess you could say it if you had to, perfect beer.

## Chapter 8: 20 minutes – the start of the end

Theresa dropped me outside Layla's house at about twenty past seven, waiting in the car as I rang the doorbell, just to make sure we were at the right place. As I waited patiently, the floodlights in the garden suddenly came to life. A loud, shrill shriek sounded out as the bell gonged one last time, and as I gave the thumbs up to Theresa, a voice finally called out through the intercom system.

"Who's there and why?" asked Layla. I don't want to say that she sounded drunk, but she definitely didn't sound sober either.

Theresa started driving away, a mystified expression having taken residence on her face as she waved me goodbye. I smiled at her awkwardly.

"It's Arlo" I said, hoping that Layla was expecting me.

"German Arlo?" she asked suspiciously.

"Yeah that's me, German Arlo" I said, not really sure how many Arlo's there were in Cape Town, but seemingly enough that one had to make sure it was the right Arlo. Was I the right Arlo?

"Well why didn't you say so! Get your ass in here!" she exclaimed, opening the gate from inside the house and running down the driveway to welcome me. She threw her arms around me enthusiastically and pulled my head close to hers so that she could whisper straight into my ear.

"Emily want's you."

I was certain I'd misheard, certain she was joking, certain that this was just some cheap trick and certain that I was imagining things.

"Wha... Who..." I was blubbering now, trying to process what Layla had told me. It wasn't real, it couldn't be real.

"Trust me Arlo. Emily *want's you*" she persisted, pulling me even closer so my ear was pressed to her lips. I was stunned, *no*, I was flabbergasted. How would Layla know, why would Layla tell me? Questions bubbled inside of me like the contents of a stew, but I choked them back when Layla quickly let go of me and put her index finger to her lips.

"Say nothing" she whispered, the strong smell of alcohol heavy on her breath as she turned around on the spot and headed back to the front door. I walked after her slowly like in a trance, wondering what I should do with the information she had given me, wondering *still* whether it was true.

I followed Layla into the house and was glad to be bombarded by Evan and Mia, who stood in the doorway, waiting for Layla to return with the new arrival. We hugged and spoke a few words, Evan and I telling the other two about our afternoon at the dam, before they pulled me into the living room where an additional twenty or so people were all standing in little groups, talking, flirting and of course, getting wasted. So, maybe Ryan did have a point, but it didn't make it any less fun for me, a point I made sure to make by grabbing the first beer I saw and taking a hefty swig from it.

I followed Evan and Mia around the room, saying hi to the people I now already knew, and introducing myself to the few I hadn't met before. Scarlett was there, offering me a strange combination of a warm hug and a chilling look, confusing me greatly. But after moving onto the next person, I'd already forgotten about the encounter. Not because I was over it or giving her the cold shoulder, but to be perfectly honest, my brain was already struggling to comprehend that a girl might actually be interested in me, so it started to filter out some of the incoming information to keep it at a manageable minimum.

"I'm Hannah" said a girl whom I had never seen before, embracing me in greeting and offering me a flashing smile.

"I'm Arlo," I replied, not quite sure what else I could say, caught off guard by how pretty she was. She smiled and nodded, pausing expectantly as though she was waiting for me to say something else.

"I like 'The XX,'" I said absurdly, referring to the music that was playing. Her smile widened and her eyes lit up.

"This is my music playing," she said, "They're one of my favorite bands of all time!"

I smiled back at her with the same sense of enthusiasm. Of all the things I could have hoped to have said, mentioning that the music was good, had been the right thing to say? The night was looking increasingly good already, my luck beginning to feel somewhat unstoppable.

I felt a hand lightly land on my shoulder and gently tug, as if asking me kindly not to be taken aback. There stood Violet, big smile on her face, her eyes unfocused. Her mouth hung open ever so slightly, bringing across the impression that something was dancing on her tongue, something she wanted to say yet didn't feel all too comfortable saying it.

"How are you, Violet?" I asked, not expecting her to be much different from when I had seen her earlier. "Are you drunk already?"

She nodded and laughed, giving me a hug that brought the scent of strawberries and caramel in one strong whiff of air. “Is t’ that obvious?” she asked, a hint of embarrassment in her voice, barely detectable due to the degree by which her words were slurring.

I gave her a hug in response, feeling like it was the natural thing to do in the given situation. “It’s only obvious if you make it obvious” I advised her, releasing her and looking her straight in the eyes.

She nodded again, then drew closer to me so only I could hear her. *What was up with all the secrecy tonight? Who exactly were we withholding information from?*

“If you’re expecting it, don’t. The higher your expectations, the lower your chances. Forget about everything you think you know and just enjoy the night” she whispered, giving me a knowing glance before gently punching me and strolling off again.

I turned around trying my best to empty my mind by looking around to get a feel for my surroundings. But then of course, emptying your mind sounds a lot easier than it is and while looking around the room, my venturing eyes eventually landed on the dancefloor where it seemed my vision had been locked into place. There she was. My fleeting whisper.

But *she*, was not Hannah, *she* was not Violet. *She* was the one who could steal my breath away and *she* was the one who could single handedly bring me to my knees. *She* was Emily, the sister of my newly found best friend, and even from where I stood half way across the room, she looked so beautiful it was hard to believe she was real. Like a fairy, like a nymph, something out of a legend which people couldn’t even hope to imagine. She looked perfect, to describe her otherwise would be a crime.

I strolled over casually, subconsciously hoping that I looked careless and worry-free. She saw me approaching and smiled, meeting me halfway to give me a hug.

“I thought you weren’t going to come, I was starting to get worried” she said teasingly, releasing me from her hold.

“You didn’t look so worried while you were dancing there” I responded, smug expression brilliant on my face.

She laughed a wonderful laugh and continued in the banter. “I had to occupy my mind elsewhere, didn’t I? How was I to know you would still come and *entertain* me?” she asked.

I shrugged my shoulders and winked at her. “You could have just drunken yourself into a stupor, but I guess since we’re both here now we might as well make the best of it,” I paused,

feeling the heavy weight of my rucksack still present on my back. “Let me just put this somewhere, I’ll be back in a minute.”

She nodded her head and whispered something that I didn’t quite catch. I looked at her with a puzzled expression, but she just shook her head, smiling, and pointed to the stairs.

“To put your stuff away” she yelled over the increasing volume of the speaker system.

Step by step I climbed, slowly reaching the second and only other level of the house and entering what I could only assume to be Layla’s bedroom. A king-sized bed with its back to the wall was sitting at the back of the room with bookshelves lined up on its right, and a TV positioned strategically on the left. Couches were set up facing the TV, leaving enough room for people to sleep on the floor. Opposite the bed was a bathroom and just beside the bathroom, was the room that most did not know was a room, the room that presumably held secrets of sexual adventures many a couples had ventured upon. You see, this room was Layla’s secret room. A room I’d been told about multiple times in the past two weeks. It was legendary.

With a door disguised as a simple bookcase, the secret room was a simple room, containing a bed and some blankets, and a set of groovy lights that could be switched on to romanticize the mood. It was the perfect hook up spot, and that was its only weakness. I may not understand girls too well, but I am aware that they’re usually not impressed if you’re intending on taking them to a muffled sex lair at their best friend’s house. So apart from that, it was perfect.

“Arlo, I was hoping you’d come up here!” exclaimed Evan as he spotted me in front of the secret room. “Come and put your bag over here, I’ve got something for you!”

I wandered over to where he was standing and put down my bag onto a small pile made up of other bags. I looked at him expectantly, waiting for him to show me what he had acquired.

“Since I wasn’t able to go out with you last weekend, let me be the first person to officially buy you a drink in Cape Town!” He pulled out a bottle of Amarula crème from his bag and pressed it into my hands. “You don’t have to drink it all, but you should. Otherwise, what’s the fun?”

I laughed while thanking him and opened the bottle to show my gratitude through a generous tipping back of the bottle. The caramel colored liquid flowed into my mouth, invading my taste buds with every little particle that came coursing through. No acidic taste. No burning of my throat that had me gasping for water. Just the sweet taste of caramel, creamy caramel, like something you would find on your ice cream, something that you would drink for desert. And that’s exactly what it was: A desert beverage, but I had no idea.

Did I mention it was a 750ml bottle of Amarula? No? Well, that was the dangerous part after all, even for a drink with ‘only’ 11 percent alcohol.

“Dude this is amazing I literally can’t thank you enough!” I said, awkwardly swinging my one arm around his shoulders and then deciding last minute that a hug was called for.

“Actually, you *can* thank me enough. You met Hannah downstairs, Layla’s friend?” I nodded. He winked. “Well that’s what I want in return for my drink.”

I laughed while taking another swig from the bottle. “If that’s what you really want, I can try and fail for you. It won’t be pretty, but, maybe it’ll help.”

“Yeah maybe not. Was just a thought. And now I want you to forget that thought before you do something stupid because of the alcohol I gave you.” He flicked my bottle while giving the room a quick look over. “If you will excuse me now however, I have left a pitcher of beer somewhere and I can hear it calling for the *sensual* touch of my tongue. Probably the worst part about being a German, am I right? You need to drink several liters of beer before you even feel a tingling in your finger. Our ancestors raised us way too well!” he shouted winking at me and disappearing down the stairs.

As I made my way to follow Evan downstairs, Kyle stopped me dead in my tracks, appearing more than delighted to have spotted me. He gave me a welcoming hug and told me I should take a sip of his wine. I didn’t want to offend him, so I took the bottle by its neck and allowed only the bare minimum to enter my mouth with its bitter and generally awful taste.

“Why are you drinking Amarula?” he asked, beckoning towards the bottle in my hand.

“Why not?” I responded jokingly, truthfully not being able to come up with a better response.

“Well it’s a desert drink buddy, it’s not really the done thing to do!” he said.

I felt strange, even alienated for lack of a better term, but nevertheless I felt like I shouldn’t let it show. “Well maybe I’ll just have to make it the done thing to do!” I replied, wittily smiling smugly at my sharp choice of words.

Kyle looked taken aback. “Well I’ll be damned, it does look like you’ve grown a pair of balls since the first day I met you! They’re not heavy yet, mind you, but there’s definitely something we can work with” He flicked my bottle (seriously, why do people always do this?) and it made a short little *twang*. “Now go piss off and drink that women’s excuse for a drink” he said winking, taking his leave and disappearing down the stairs.

Soon the Layla's bedroom went eerily quiet, the music from downstairs sounding suddenly very distant, and very hollow. I looked around the room searching for signs of life, a person, a natural sound, *anything*. What I discovered was a lot more than I would have bargained for. Actually, it was the last person in the world I would have ever imagined ending up in a bedroom alone with. *Scarlett*.

There she was, sitting on the bed, feet dangling just above the ground, and her hair undone. Those were the things I noticed, but those things did nothing to diffuse the obvious tension even slightly.

"So, it's just the two of us then?" she asked, obviously aware of the answer.

I nodded. "I guess it is."

The dreaded silence took over again. I was looking at her, I mean, I didn't have a reason to look anywhere else, and the gaze we shared was hauntingly exhilarating.

"Why don't you come over here and sit down?" asked Scarlett. What I had described the past weekend as being 'the look', given by women, was not present on her face. But, did I even know the look? Was there even a look? Probably not, because looks can be deceiving and surely girls could just put on a t-shirt if they were trying to send a message, there's no way they'd be deliberately confusing and mystic, right? Wait, do they do it on purpose? Wow. Mind potentially blown.

"I'm not going to hook up with you" I blurted out, losing control over my senseless talking and giving in to the alcohol. I took another swig of the bottle which suddenly felt light and nonexistent in my hand, as if it were an illusion, a deception being conjured by someone other than myself. I felt light. I felt as light as my bottle, I think.

"Why do you think I want to hook up with you?" she asked.

I shook my head. "It's not going to happen."

She laughed and asked me again, "Why do you think I even want to? It's a bit of an arrogant assumption, don't you think?"

I gulped. I didn't have an answer for that. I didn't even know why I'd said anything, it wasn't like I actually thought she wanted me. But I did. I did think that. *Ugh* everything was becoming so bloody confusing; couldn't she just be honest with me so we could skip the constant signaling.

And then I was floating, that much is true, only I knew that I wasn't really floating, that the floating, was only happening in my mind. I shook my head trying to clear my thoughts. I had successfully managed to outdrink myself, and though I pray you never end up in a similar situation, I can't help thinking back to how unrelentingly hilarious it was.

"I don't know, but I really can't hook up with you. A part of me wants to, but that part has been reduced so much that it would just be wrong. Does any of that make sense?" I asked, no longer sure whether I was talking to Scarlett or the wall.

"I get it, but why did you think I wanted to hook up with you?" she asked again.

I shrugged my shoulders, suddenly feeling a bit awkward as though I had now only realized that we were in fact talking about me and Scarlett, and the two of us doing... well... doing... well doing *sex things*, is the expression I'm looking for. "I think the Amarula told me" I said truthfully.

A fresh fit of giggles escaped Scarlett's mouth as she stood up and slowly walked toward me. "If the Amarula speaks to you, then why don't you ask it something for me? Like for instance, why you wouldn't want to hook up with me right *now*?"

The tension reached an all-time high in a matter of milliseconds. I panicked at the sight of Scarlett approaching me. Even if the look doesn't exist, at this point in time she was biting her tongue and playing with her hair. And if you put both of those things into a search engine, it will tell you that the girl is interested, so blaming me for dreaming up this whole 'look thing', is a bit farfetched and makes you look kind of stupid, so there.

I looked towards the door leading to the stairs. It was closed, Kyle must have closed it! How had I not realized? I looked at the Amarula bottle which appeared to be only about 20% full. Had I drunk all of that without even realizing it? Panic stricken, my eyes darted back and forth as Scarlett drew nearer and nearer and my brain went into overdrive, looking for a solution to escape the inevitability. The truth hadn't changed, after all. There was an actual female who might be interested in me, and if I didn't think of anything quick there was no ways I was going to be motivated enough to say no.

And then the whole train smashed into the station wall. Just like that. You know that train where I theorize all my knowledge on females is contained? Yeah, well it was now engulfed in fucking flames, because my brain had decided to come to a conclusion that I was nowhere near prepared to actualize at that point in time. But, being the dick that is my brain, it shoved it down

my throat regardless, and so before I considered what it meant, I spat it out and hoped that it would stick.

“I wouldn’t hook up with you because, ah fuck it, I want to hook up with Emily!” I yelled out, surprising both of us. The room started swaying and I felt the lack or excess gravity as though I were on a boat.

“Are you being serious?” asked Scarlett, unreadable expression dominating her face. Or maybe it was readable, maybe I was just too drunk to read it, at this point, pretty much anything was possible.

I nodded, “I didn’t really know it before tonight, actually I don’t think I knew it like five minutes ago. But now, yeah, that’s kind of definitely what I want and I think it might end up killing me.”

She laughed weakly at my joke, but there was a definite look of disappointment in her eyes, and just knowing that I had caused it, made me nearly reconsider the whole hastiness of my brain.

“And it’s not just the alcohol talking?” she asked, giving me the perfect chance to take back what I’d said. But, I shook my head. There was no going back. It was out there, we could pretend I hadn’t said anything at all, but the truth was still out there. Even if hooking up with her would have changed the story for the better, I just can’t do it. Maybe not hooking up with her, doesn’t actually help, but it’s good for my ego that I was able to reject someone for once, so you know what, I’ll take it.

“OK then,” she said, taking the last steps toward me and kissing me on the cheek. I died a little bit then. Not a lot, but a little for sure. Here was a girl who was actually interested in me, kissing me on the cheek and offering herself up. But when I had finished dying, I started to imagine a world, where I did hook up with Scarlett on the first weekend, not the second, that she picked me instead of Kevin, and maybe then, just maybe, I’d be writing this book about her, not Emily. But it doesn’t matter, because that’s not how it turned out. It turned out rather differently in fact.

“Thank you for understanding, I knew you would” I said, my voice so sincere it could have made an angel believe me. Scarlett looked at me one more time, disappointment visible in her dark brown eyes before she turned around and opened the door to the stairs. She walked on down, her hair flowing openly behind her with every step she took and before I knew it I was following her down.

We arrived on the dancefloor and shared a knowing glance before parting ways one last time. I raised the Amarula bottle up to my lips and drank the last bit of it in one sweeping motion. The feeling of alcohol induced happiness expanded within my stomach, warming me up and giving me that familiar *you can do anything* feeling.

My eyes started wandering. Confidence bubbled inside of me like a cauldron about to overflow. I had a place to be, I had things to do, and for the first time in my 16 and a half years of existence, confidence was not a problem. Now where was Emily?

When I finally spotted her talking to a group of people, the music had changed to the next song, and although I don't recall exactly what song it was, everyone in the house knew it, and everyone wanted to dance to it. I personally like to place my bets on the song having been either *P.I.M.P by 50 Cent*, or *Candy Shop also by 50 Cent*. How much would I bet on that, you ask? Piss off you smartass.

Emily saw me and came over to me, dancing with me while roaring the lyrics of the song. I suddenly felt very important, having the perfect girl dancing alongside me was probably a dream come true, and the way I handled it, didn't even seem half bad.

"I love this song" I yelled out to her, moving closer attempting to break down the invisible barrier between us.

"What did you say?" she yelled back. Right, the music was very loud. Hmm.

I smiled at her. I felt so absolutely wonderful! The music was making me all chirpy. Or was it the music? No, no, it was definitely the 750ml of Amarula Crème I'd downed in panic.

"I said that I really love this song" I yelled again.

She seemed to hear me as she nodded her head, still jumping in the air and still pumping her fists. She really had a peculiar way of dancing, an unorthodox way of dancing something that looked out of place in a crowd. But out of place also meant that all eyes were on her, how could they not be? An objective person would say, that she looked a lot like Barack Obama would have looked like when he found out that he'd shot the wrong Osama Bin Laden. Confused, but still vibey.

Butterflies started fluttering in my stomach as I let myself go wild and move along to the music. I felt her piercing eyes, killing me softly with such certainty and pleasure. I couldn't look away. I knew she was aware of my stare but I simply couldn't look away!

"It is a cool song!" she responded, taking me a minute to realize what she was talking about. I guess I hadn't expected her to say anything in response to the most cliché line of this century, but hey, people surprise you.

My heart skipped a beat. I felt like we were the only two in a lonely world, spending our time dancing because we had nothing else to do.

A wave of dizziness suddenly washed over me, forcing me to stop my jumping and retreat momentarily. She observed me as I moved to the couch and sat down, watching me with a close eye offering me guidance. I smiled at her awkwardly, not being able to think of anything useful to say. She smiled back and stopped dancing, slowly walking towards me.

"Are you OK?" she asked, setting herself down beside me.

"That depends" I said squinting, trying desperately to concentrate on the beautiful woman beside me.

"That depends on what?"

"That depends on how long you're going to stay sitting here with me."

I blinked. Had I really just said that? That was so smooth, but the amazing thing was that the delivery had been as smooth as the actual content. And I always fucked up on one or the other, but stars above, *tonight* I did not.

She laughed and leant a little closer to me. "I'll stay as long as you want me to stay."

I blinked thrice fold. How was everything going so well? Did I have game or were we both just completely trashed?

"I feel a bit weak getting tired after dancing to one song" I admitted. "I'm clearly not as energetic as you." Ah yes, among the words most used by Shakespeare to woo the ladies, energetic had always been at the top of that list.

"One song? We've been dancing for the last fifteen minutes I was amazed by how much energy *you* had!" My world started spinning again, something I seemed to be able to control less and less as the night grew on. Fifteen minutes? Was I really this faded already? If I'd lost awareness of time, was I already on my merry way to passing out in an hour or two?

"I thought it was only one song, I think I've lost the awerness of time" I said, heavily slurring my words. Emily laughed.

"Do you mean the *awareness* of time?" she asked.

I laughed, unsurprised. I was able to think of the words perfectly but saying them seemed to pose quite a challenge.

“Dash what I shed.”

“Arlo, you’re bloody drunk, how much did you have to drink?”

“Just one.”

“One beer!”

“No, one bottle of Amarula!” The defensiveness in my tone seemed to amuse her even more.

“Well I’m not surprised if you’re feeling a little drunk then!” she winked at me as though to reassure me. “I’ve had my fair share to drink so don’t worry, I know exactly how you feel right now.”

I looked up at her as a plan seemed to take refuge in my mind.

“Can you bring me somewhere to lie down? I feel like just chilling and watching the ceiling would be the best thing to do right now.” I said boldly.

Her look never wavered as she examined my face. She smiled yet again, the crescent of her lips making me feel warm and fuzzy.

“Let’s go upstairs”

I grinned stupidly. Those three words were the best I’d ever heard, short and sweet but they were the key to my heart.

From standing up, to landing face down in Layla’s bed, I remember nothing. It was as though my brain slept for the unimportant parts of the evening, only waking up when it took an interest in my activities.

“I thought you wanted to look at the ceiling?” Emily asked.

I looked up and saw her lying there beside me. To describe what she looked like is simply too strenuous. You wouldn’t understand, even if I related her to your perception of beauty, you simply wouldn’t understand. She was God like, portraying everything I treasured and valued in the world, she was my angel, my angel in the night.

“I think I’d rather look at you, the ceiling seems boring compared to you” is what I would have liked to have said. What I really said went more along the lines of, “You’re boring when the ceiling is looked at,” or “The ceiling is less boring than you”. The best part was though, that the

content of the sentence didn't even matter, all I know is my speech was slurred and it forced Emily to laugh even more. Mission accomplished!

I peered at the door which I knew led to the stairs and noticed that it was closed, locked. I pictured Evan and the other people from the party all perched just outside, eavesdropping on my very personal conversation about ceilings. I smiled at the thought of that.

"Do you like peanut butter?" I asked, eyeing a jar of the substance on Layla's bedside table.

Emily followed my gaze. "I do like peanut butter, do you?" I nodded my head.

She grabbed the jar and opened it slowly, focusing her eyes on me, a teasing smile tugging at her lips.

I nodded my head again. "I would really like some peanut butter now."

The lid of the jar fell to the bed and all was still. Emily put her index finger into the jar and produced a heap of clumpy brown spread. I held my breath, what would happen next was crucial, my drunken-self deciding that there were only two possible outcomes that could come out of the next few moments.

"Why don't you come over here and get it?" she asked, putting her finger in her mouth and licking the peanut butter clean off.

I smiled, that was it, go for it Arlo she's yours. I crawled on my stomach, ridding the distance between us and leaning in to her face. Our lips met and the fireworks that had been ready for go, exploded within my mind as a happiness fulfilled me completely like never before. And the kiss continued, our lips never parting, a feeling so wonderful I could have turned to stone right there and then and would have stayed content for the rest of eternity.

Ugh.

As you might have guessed it by now, that's not quite how the evening went. What kind of a story would it be if I got the girl in the eighth chapter? Maybe just a short story or a really long essay, but as I've mentioned before, that's not how it happened.

As I landed face first in Layla's bed, Emily lay down beside me and snuggled up close. It was at this point in time, that I lost all confidence the Amarula had given me and was left unguarded, trying to fend off dizziness and paranoia. I remember leaning in to her more than once or twice, but never quite following through, the threat of rejection too real and too fearsome. We talked about silly things, like alcohol and school, what our favorite things were and what we wanted to be when we were older. It was like a real-life Facebook chat, no action just talking and

although nothing happened because I was too drunk or too afraid if I'm honest, it was still the most beautiful time I'd ever spent with anyone.

As I would find out in the coming weeks and days, it had been twenty long minutes that I had spent there with her. Twenty minutes, imagine the things you can do in twenty long minutes!

For me, as I realized moments after *my* twenty minutes, talking had not only been pleasing, it had been extremely tiring. Or something like that, because all too soon I blacked out, forgetting I was with Emily, forgetting how happy I was. Which was OK, because I knew it would happen eventually, anyone who loses their awareness of time is bound to lose complete control of reality at some point in their haze. It's just the natural order of things and when it gripped me, it gripped me in its clutches so tight that it was an awful long time before I woke again. And when I woke, I found myself on the floor of Layla's shower.

.....

## Chapter 9: An unexpected friend

The first thing I did when I woke up, was to check if I was sober. Negative. The second thing I did when I woke up, was investigate my surroundings to figure out where I was. The floor of Layla's shower, which was definitely a first.

My eyes started to slowly adjust to the bright lights hanging over my spinning head. So much had happened that I wasn't actually sure what it was that *had* happened. Did I hook up with Scarlett? Didn't seem likely. Did I hook up with Emily? Nah probably not. Did I do anything apart from sleeping in the shower?

My heart sank and I groaned as the last memories I could remember began rushing into my mind like a relentless wave. It was overwhelming to say the least, nothing could have prepared me for it, not even the Amarula I had come to rely on for the entire night. The alcoholic euphoria had completely vanished.

I struggled to my feet, looking at myself in the mirror and realizing I had zero motivation to do anything ever again. It was a surreal feeling. That was just what the alcohol did. As long as you were happy and in a good space, it would maximize those effects and shoot you to the moon. But if the tables turned and you found yourself in a momentary depression, the effects would turn on you and kick you on the ground, like rubbing salt into an open wound. That's just how I felt. Like an open wound with salt all over me. Lots and lots of salt.

I pulled opened the bathroom door and entered Layla's bedroom. No one was there, the whole room lay empty, and on the bed stood a lone jar of peanut butter that I could have sworn was shaking its head right at me. What was the bloody point anymore? I was useless. I was positively and undeniably useless. And a jar of peanut butter was confirming those things.

I fumbled in my pockets searching for my phone, wanting to reconstruct a bit of a timeline of the evening, just so I could get my bearings.

23:00. How on earth was it 23:00 already? It seemed like less than an hour ago, I had pulled up in Theresa's Prius, ready to party and get the girl of my dreams...

I shivered. I actually lost the feeling of body heat and shivered. And then everything started spinning again, and this time the spinning wouldn't stop. It just kept going like a tornado, or maybe a blender that was broken and couldn't stop. But it didn't make me nauseous, it made me feel numb, it made me feel like air. Which is a damn funny thing to feel like, what does air even feel like?

I shook my head as I had done before, desperately searching for some clarity, something that seemed untouched by the influence of alcohol. The word dawned on me, a scape-goat I could use, a word I could use to blame all of my problems on! Alcohol. For the first time in my life, a something had presented itself, a something that I could blame every little problem on. The root of evil, alcohol. And everyone would have to believe me, because quite frankly it was plausible. More than plausible. This wasn't some 'the dog ate my homework', bullshit. This was more of a 'gravy spilt on my homework and then the dog ate it'. It was concrete, it was believable.

I smiled and walked towards the door that led downstairs. My mood was swaying from moment to moment, bipolar and dangerous. I tried to think of positive things, wanting to avoid the demons of the alcohol depression.

I groaned as I looked down with hopelessness at the stairs. Each step on its own seemed to be vibrating, humming of sorts and wanting to fly. It reminded me weirdly of the flying mountains from James Cameron's *Avatar*, but the stairs were obviously a lot smaller and I was having to jump from one to the next, mainly because I didn't have some dope flying creature which could give me a ride.

What did it matter if I fell? If I made it down, good. If I didn't, who would care? Though furiously trying to avoid the negativity, it was becoming more difficult the longer I stared at the steps. It was getting to that time that my night should come to an end, dragging it out could only lead to more, me feeling like shit.

So, I pulled what was perhaps the smartest move I had pulled all night. I got down flat on my ass and skidded down the steps, causing no real injury to myself or anyone else at the bottom. I stood up victorious with a fat genuine smile. The negativity vanished again, even if only for a fleeting moment.

And then there she was. And for a brief moment I was sober, feeling nothing in fact, just the awe of seeing her standing there. Emily. The pain and worry hit me at the same time like a train wreck, what would she say, and what would she do? There was no way in hell she could just pretend nothing had happened. I mean, she wouldn't. Would she?

Just before I wanted to go to where she was sitting, apologize for having been so drunk and ask for another chance, I noticed from the corner of my eye, that someone was sneaking towards the front door. He didn't look like he was escaping, more like he wanted some peace and quiet.

That was something I could relate to, so I put aside my hopes and dreams for the moment, and simply followed the guy without much of an intent in mind.

I arrived in the second living room which was by the front door and sat next to the person I'd followed. I knew him from school but couldn't really label him. Maybe I needed to stop seeing the world as just Emily and open my eyes to broaden my horizons.

"Hey there" I said.

"Hey, Arlo" he replied.

"Hey, Dylan" I said. I paused. I did know his name!

"How has your evening been?" he asked me.

I laughed as though it was a joke. "Well to be honest with you, I really messed up with Emily man. Like really messed up." NO, Arlo, shut up, stop talking! My inner sober self was screaming to break through. Stop telling him your problems and have a conversation that doesn't revolve around you and your love life, for once.

"What do you mean?" he asked, indulging me.

"Well I was in a bed with her for a while and it was just the two of us. And then well, I didn't really do anything, even though I really wanted to. And then I woke up in the shower. So, I think I have a drinking problem on top of everything else" I said. Dylan laughed, then stopped when he realized that I was being deadly serious.

"OK, first things first, you do not have a drinking problem. Because if you do, then everyone here does as well." He looked deep into my eyes waiting till I'd conceded he was right. I nodded.

"Secondly, you did not mess up with Emily. If you want to still hook up with her, I'm like a hundred percent certain that you can make it happen. It's all up to what you believe is possible. Spiritual balance and shit like that trust me."

I stared blankly for a few moments before I dared open my mouth again. I liked this guy, I liked this guy a lot.

"Thanks, thanks a lot" I said.

"No problem at all, man."

We both broke our eye contact and looked straight ahead, the walls of the living room suddenly claiming our interest.

"So how did your evening go?" I asked, wanting to keep the conversation going.

“It went really well actually. I hooked up with Scarlett,”

“Like Scarlett, the Scarlett in our grade?”

“Yeah...” Dylan trailed off, not quite sure what to make of my tone. “Why?”

“She wanted to hook up with me earlier but I rejected her.” The penny dropped. A douche bag, would definitely say that. And I wasn’t a douche bag, but alcohol did seem to bring out the worst in people. I’d like to tell you that I tried to stop myself from saying it, I’d like to tell you that I said something like ‘good for you’ or ‘nice one dude’. But I didn’t, I told him something that was just so douchey.

Dylan seemed indifferent in regards to my comment. “I know, she told me about it.” I never found out if he was lying, trying to make a less awkward situation out the very awkward one I had created, but regardless, he handled it well and I loved him for it.

“Was it a nice hookup then?” I asked, pushing him for details. He nodded his head and grinned at my question.

“I don’t really know what makes a great hookup, but I definitely enjoyed it.”

Like a stray cat that wouldn’t leave us alone, the silence crept back in, leaving us searching for words. I looked at the walls and I looked at the furniture. I looked everywhere in the room for something to fill the gap in our conversation. Nothing came, nothing presented itself.

“I guess we should probably get back to the others then?” I asked, looking back at Dylan.

He shrugged his shoulders. “If that’s what you think?”

I said nothing. I couldn’t make sense of what he had said, I couldn’t understand what he had tried to say. “What do you mean if that’s what I think?”

“Dude you need to sober up pretty quickly” said Dylan, beginning to laugh and stand up.  
“I was only joking with you.”

I grinned like a maniac, agreeing with his statement. I did need to sober up, even drunk Arlo knew that.

“How do you think I can sober up?” I asked, standing up and putting my faith in Dylan. He seemed to have an answer to every question I posed, and every answer he gave me seemed to make perfect sense.

“I reckon you should climb the tree in Layla’s garden. You did it already earlier on, and it’s basically a proven fact that climbing things sobers you up. I think it’s the altitude that does it”

he said, matter-of-factly. I stood there dumbfounded, not quite sure if he was messing with me or not.

“And if I climb a tree, will I be able to hook up with Emily?” I asked, testing the bullshit.

“No, of course not. Don’t be stupid, why would climbing a tree make a girl want to hook up with you?” he asked, surprised by my stupidity.

I was happy with his answer. “I don’t know, I was just trying to see if you were fucking with me.”

He laughed and slapped me gently behind the head. “You’re either an idiot, or you’re just really drunk. So, go climb that tree so we can eliminate either one of them!” he said, opening the door and pointing in the direction of the garden with his hand.

I walked out like a king, slow and casual, and approached the garden. As I walked past Emily, I did the only thing I could think of and nodded just once. “Hey” I said and kept on walking without waiting for a response.

But she did respond, she responded with a smile and a just as casual “Hey”, and as my heart was filled with absolute delight, I realized Dylan had probably been right. I’d only messed up, if I told myself I’d messed up.

And yet I kept on walking, walking as though her smile didn’t even affect me, walking as though I had better things to do than be with her. Which wasn’t true, obviously, but I figured if I wanted to be sober enough to apologize and tell her that I’d really enjoyed my time with her, then I should get around to climbing that tree.

The spinning came again, just as I was trying to eradicate it by taking my first step up the tree. The alcohol was trying to stop me, trying to keep me in its drunken clutches, but *no*, this had gone on long enough, if I wanted to move on with my life, not to mention sober up before I was to be picked up, the time was now.

So, I climbed, up, up and higher up the tree, using the spinning as a type of GPS. The air felt cleaner away from the ground and the tree bore an aura of tranquility which it extended to me, seemingly aware that I needed its helping hand. I reached the top and sat there very still for a moment, focusing on my breathing, delighted that I was in fact sobering up.

And then I jumped, before I even thought about jumping at all. I jumped falling vertically, heading straight for Layla’s stone garden table, thinking if I landed straight in the middle, the balance would be sufficient and I would be OK. But I hadn’t calculated with the spinning of my

mind, the fact that I hit any part of the table was a miracle, not to mention the fact that I didn't break anything.

Let me take that back, I didn't break any of *my bones*. But I did break the stone table, which now lay in two perfect pieces in two separate places.

I groaned. *Shit*. I did feel a lot soberer but the fact that I had broken a seventy Kilogram table was just... was just... annoying. It was really annoying.

"Did you really just break my table?" asked Layla disbelief obvious in her voice. I turned around from the 'rubble' and looked at Layla who had been sitting in the corner of the garden the entire time.

"It's not really broken. Trust me I'm German, I can fix it." I said hastily, rushing back inside to get someone to help me. *Emily*.

As I looked back, in the weeks to come, on this night, I admit wholeheartedly that getting Emily to help me complete manual labor, was not my best chising attempt.

"Emily come quick, help me fix the table" I shouted, tugging on her arm and rushing back outside.

"Did you *really* just break my table?" asked Layla again, not having moved from her position in the corner.

"I didn't really break it. I can fix it, I swear" I repeated reassuringly, approaching the Base of the table.

Layla didn't move. She actually looked less annoyed than me, but I can't really say that she looked amused either. "I'm not mad, but you better bloody fix it!"

Emily came through the doorway with what I imagine to be a big smile on her face as she walked up to me and put her hand on my shoulder.

"Did you just break the table?" she asked amused, breaking on the last word and laughing at me.

I shook my head. "I didn't break the table. I temporarily *maimed* it" I said, big words appearing in my vocabulary again.

Emily laughed again. "Arlo, you are way too drunk! Next time, go easy on the Amarula, hey?" She backed away as I started moving the base of the table back into place.

"Aren't you going to help me?" I asked half-jokingly as I noticed I was literally, pulling all the weight myself.

“I’m not very strong” was all she said, shrugging her shoulders and laughing again.

I accepted that. It was my fault, I had drunk too much and now I had to fix what I could, the first thing being the table of course.

How I did it, I still have no idea. What I did to fix it, I also have no idea. But I did it, and it made my muscles ache the next day given that I’m not really a very sporty person.

I smiled looking at the masterpiece I’d created/fixed. There it was. Layla’s stone table, good as new, and I had done all the work. Mainly because I’d been stupid enough to ask a girl who wasn’t particularly muscly to help me, but nevertheless, I *had* done all the work.

“Can you try not to break it again?” shouted Layla, still sitting unmoved in her corner. She was laughing and shaking her head in the dark, having watched my weight lifting which must have been relatively amusing to say the least.

“I’ll try my best not to!” I shouted back, now also laughing. I was really chuffed.

I was chuffed until I learned the truth, that is. See what I had actually done, and I still don’t really know how exactly I did it, was place the table underneath the base, so that the whole table had been flipped, making it look like some weak attempt at contemporary art. When Layla and Evan told me about it in school on Monday morning, I didn’t believe them, thinking they were trying to mess with me. But no, I had actually put in double the effort and flipped the table without even noticing.

“Arlo your lift is here!” shouted someone from inside the house. I didn’t panic. I felt sober. Sober enough to drive in the car with Stephan, but obviously not sober enough to view my error in fixing the table.

After fetching my bag from Layla’s bedroom, I said goodbye to everyone I could find, starting with Layla outside and moving through the house with Emily following close behind. I arrived at the gate leading to the outside and turned around to say goodbye to Emily. It was movie perfect, it really was. This was the part where the guy kissed the girl.

“I guess you’re going then.” she said, a hint of something visible in her voice.

“Yeah...” I said, trailing off not really thinking of anything better to say. So, she smiled and started turning around as though she wanted to go back to the party. Now. Now or never! I grabbed her by the arm and gently pulled her back pulling her into a hug. And if this was a normal love story then surely I’d have kissed her just a moment thereafter.

But it's not a normal love story, I mean everyone gets tired of that same cliché shit, don't lie. But that's not why I didn't kiss her. I didn't kiss her because I was too scared, too aware of the fact that I had enjoyed spending time with her so much, that I now couldn't just risk throwing that away. And that's when my life really started I guess, that realization, that sense of knowing.

"I had a really nice time with you tonight, Emily. I had a really nice time" I said, as I released her from my hold and turned around to leave.

She smiled at me and spoke those 13 words which I would cherish forever. "I had a really nice time with you too. Get home safe, Arlo."

And that was that. I left the property of one Layla Clearwater and got into a Land Rover driven by Stephan Martin. All was still and if nature had allowed it we would have heard the crickets chirp.

"Did you have a nice night, Arlo?" asked Stephan, yawning and smiling at me with big blue eyes.

"I believe I did Stephan, I believe I did."

## Chapter 10: A cow is a cow in most languages

In the week that followed Layla's get together, two rumors about me spread like wildfire, and for the most part though I still hate to admit it, the rumors were made up of mainly the truth.

The first rumor being of course, that I had spent twenty minutes in a bed with Emily alone, and I hadn't done anything. *That one* spread by the end of Monday already, and I'm sure if I'd asked basically anyone in the school how my Saturday evening had gone, they would be able to give me the whole story, extended edition and everything.

Like with most rumors, as this particular one was being spread, people added to it, manipulating the truth as far as they could. My favorite of these additions was that we had both been naked, and while we were naked we had just laid there, staring, not even talking. That one amused me, it made the truth seem a lot less... of a disaster. If that's how bad things could have gotten, then surely, I had only been slightly unlucky.

The second rumor being whispered around the halls of Bergford, was how I had destroyed Layla's table and how apparently, she was livid about it. That one took a while to spread, and by the time everyone had heard about it, she had already come up to me and told me that it had already been fixed (again), and that I shouldn't believe the rumors that the damage had cost R10,000.

But she was mad about it, I could see it in her eyes and so I decided to use a trick I had learnt from Evan; to off to buy her a drink some time. She grudgingly accepted and warned me not to break any of her other stuff. We hugged and peacefully parted ways, disappointing the small crowd of onlookers that had gathered to watch the interaction, no doubt expecting there to be carnage on display.

Come to think of it, I think I still owe Layla that drink, so if you're reading this, hit me up. I'm not great on the money front at the moment, but maybe we can split a drink.

For an update on Emily, the rumors seemed to affect her least of all, which was surprising. She would come up to me and greet me with the same affection as before, and if she wasn't interested in me at all anymore, she had a really difficult way of showing it.

And that's pretty much how the week had been, rumor filled with on and off flirting, and the occasional visit to a classroom. A happy week, an exciting week and I had already been invited to a variety of events on the weekend, a rather superficial feeling I was beginning to realize I relied upon.

So now, on the Friday of that same week, the last lesson of the day, the whole class seemed to gasp in unison as my name was called out over the intercom, asking me to please visit Mr. Peterson the school guidance counselor, immediately.

My nerves built up, I had never been in trouble with any form of authority before, and I didn't really feel like starting it now, in a country where I didn't even understand the 'ladder of power'. Could the guidance counsellor expel me? Although I doubted it, I had no proof to support the contrary and so as I made my way out the door and up the stairs to Mr. Peterson's office, my fingers began to shake a little, worried of what it was I might have done wrong.

The door was closed and showed no signs of life within, but I disregarded this and went ahead and knocked twice.

"Who is it?" called out the raspy voice of Mr. Peterson from inside the office.

"It's Arlo, sir." I replied.

There was a pause as Mr. Peterson walked to the door, which he then opened. His office was simple, containing a desk at the far end opposite the table, one chair behind it and two in front. I don't want to say that it looked identical to the office of my guidance counsellor back in Berlin, but they did look eerily similar.

"Please come in, Arlo. Take a seat" he said, beckoning to the two chairs closest to the door. I entered the room and the door was promptly closed behind me. I watched with careful eyes as Mr. Peterson walked around me to sit on his chair, pulling out a piece of paper from his filing cabinet.

"Do you have any idea why I called you in here today, Arlo?" he asked me, his bushy eyebrows raised with expectations.

I shook my head truthfully, "I honestly don't know sir. I haven't done anything wrong as far as I know. All the teachers seem to like me". Except one. There was one teacher that I knew hated me, but since she hated basically everyone at the school I shouldn't be flattering myself with her anger.

Mr. Peterson seemed to analyze what I'd said in silence, as he worked it over in his head, his eyes fluttering constantly like the gears of a machine. I'd only met him once before on my first day at Bergford, where he'd wanted to introduce himself to me. He'd been as nervous then as he seemed now, but it still seemed a little weird.

“Well Arlo, I’ve received a complaint from one of the teachers about you, do you have any idea which teacher it might have been?” he asked. My breathing slowed. This was ridiculous, surely not even Ms. Cliffords would... I mean the last time I had seen the woman was a week ago, surely she couldn’t be complaining only now.

“I have no idea sir, as I’ve said, I thought that all the teachers I’ve met, liked me.” I repeated truthfully.

“Do you have any idea who Ms. Cliffords is, Arlo?” he asked. The penny dropped, I had to bite my tongue to stop the annoyance showing in my face.

“I briefly met her, sir. She had something to complain about?” I asked innocently, thinking if I played dumb I could get away easier with whatever it was she had complained about.

“She did indeed. Do you have any idea about what she may have complained about?” asked Mr. Peterson. *Do you have any idea* was quickly becoming my least favorite sentence in the world and Mr. Peterson’s sleepy voice was definitely not helping.

“Sir, I really have no idea” I said as sincerely as I could.

“Well Arlo, Ms. Cliffords has complained that you verbally abused her in German and called her a cow in front of another pupil. Is this true?” he asked.

My mouth formed a perfect O in mock horror, as I head dived with gusto into the lie.

“Oh, Mr. Peterson! I’m so sorry about this whole mix up! Of course I wasn’t calling Ms. Cliffords a cow, I was quoting a line from a German movie to my friend Evan. I didn’t even know Ms. Cliffords spoke German, though I can see how she would be offended. Now I feel stupid for not clearing while I had the chance” I said, feigning embarrassment as best as I could.

Mr. Peterson stared at me for an uncomfortable few seconds, no doubt toying with the idea that I could be telling the truth.

“So, you were not trying to provoke a confrontation from Ms. Cliffords?” he asked. The guy wasn’t stupid, he pretty much had the whole story down to a tee, I was actually impressed.

“Never sir. She hasn’t done anything wrong to me, I’m so sorry that we got off on the wrong foot!” I replied.

He smiled. “I’d thought it was probably a misunderstanding, you seem like a good kid Arlo, a lot like your cousins. I want you to have the best experience as possible from this exchange and it would be horrible for it to be ruined by some petty feud with a teacher.” He paused as he looked over his letter. I relaxed. It seemed I’d managed to dodge the noose by mere centimeters.

“Unfortunately, Ms. Cliffords is convinced that you really did try and ‘attack’ her, in her own words, so I’m supposed to give you detention from her.”

I froze in my chair. A wave of unjustice had just crashed down on me. Here was my guidance counsellor, telling me he believed me, but still dishing out a punishment regardless of what he thought. I mean I did it, we all know this, but I’d still made an effort to escape, and upon succeeding I should have done just that, escaped.

“How exactly is that fair, *sir*?” I gritted my teeth, desperately not trying to let the frustration show.

“Well it may not be fair, but if a teacher gives you detention there’s nothing I can do to change that. It’s the teachers decision after all” said Mr. Peterson shrugging his shoulders.

“Sir, then why am I sitting here with you, if it’s already been decided?” I asked, my tone now allowing more of my true state of mind to show. This was utterly ridiculous.

“Well I thought I better make sure that you’re not going down some bad path here at the school, getting mixed up with the wrong crowds and such. As the guidance counsellor it is my responsibility to provide guidance after all.” Yeah, he actually had the balls or stupidity to say that. It’s the guidance counsellor’s responsibility to give guidance to students. Well fuck me upside down, isn’t that a new revelation.

“Sir, I’m not in the wrong!” I exclaimed. “If I’m not allowed to quote movies anymore, where exactly does free speech leave us?” I asked, clawing at the last ledge before I fell completely to the ground.

Mr. Peterson sighed, and handed me the piece of paper. “I don’t know Arlo, but I know you can’t win this battle. Free speech is still free, you just can’t call a teacher a cow I’m afraid. Take your three hours of detention and pretend it never happened. That’s the best way forward I think.”

I got up from the chair with the piece of paper clenched in my hand. My eyes flashed red as I headed towards the door.

“Before you leave, Arlo, make sure to come to me if there’s anything ever bothering you. I am here to give guidance after all” said Mr. Peterson, chuckling to himself. I rolled my eyes as soon as my back was turned. What I’d essentially just learned was that I could always come to Mr. Peterson if I had a problem. What I’d also learned, was that he couldn’t do shit about it.

I slammed the door on my way out. I wanted him to know that giving me *three* hours of detention was beyond ridiculous. I mean conservative is one thing, but apparently the teachers of Bergford had a completely redefined definition of the word discipline. *Three* hours for something that the teacher couldn't even prove, how many hours would I get if they actually caught me for something?

As I thought about ways to entertain myself for three hours on a Friday afternoon, I walked past my classroom and headed for the toilets with every intention of skipping the last ten minutes of class. I did not need to become the main subject of another rumor (ironic because I'm writing a book with me as the main subject), two were enough for one week. But as I sat there, hands gripping the sink before me as I looked at myself in the mirror, one thought kept slamming its way into my brain. *I could have gotten away with it. I could have gotten away with it.*

## Chapter 11: A whack party – the beginning

So, in life, you have good things and bad things, that's just a fact. You have happy and sad things, but above all when it really comes down to it, you have fun things, and you have not so fun things. Those are the umbrella categories everyone should rely on, because above all, everything you do in life is either enjoyable or not enjoyable. It's how we measure our quality of life.

Detention, is a not enjoyable activity. The word itself should imply it, but nothing can prepare for just how shitty it really is. Sitting in a room on an uncomfortable chair for three hours, staring at a brick wall and being forced to sit up straight in an upright position, was basically in line with my expectations of actual torture. Except that torture is probably a lot more painful, and the chances of you dying are higher... but then again those are just technicalities.

For the better part of my punishment, I attempted the infamous 'counting of the bricks' a tradition which seemed to be as old as the school itself. Since the only thing coming even remotely close to a scenic view was a brick laden wall with barely any color or characteristics, students made the best of it and attempted to count just exactly how many bricks made up the wall.

Although this small activity may seem like nothing more than adding one plus one to you, you probably haven't been on the front line to see it with your own eyes, to live it. While concentrating on sitting upright so the prefects don't shout at you, trying to count bricks with only thin lines of cement separating each one, the task is nearly impossible.

With results ranging from; three hundred and sixty-one, to three hundred and seventy-two, I was as close to counting the right number as I was from winning the lottery. And I didn't even play the lottery.

So, giving up after about two and a half hours had passed, I tried imagining the great time I would be having later, as soon as the clock allowed this hell to freeze over. As I mentioned earlier in the last chapter, I had already made plans for the weekend coming up, and although I thought the detention may easily ruin them, as the end of my penalty gradually approached, I built up an excitement for going to Evan's house straight after school, who was having a small get together at his house in the evening.

Considering that the week had been filled with on and off chising with Emily, the possibility of another opportunity with her practically got my stomach churning. But churning in a good way, I don't really know how churning could be a good thing, but in this case, thinking of Emily, churning was most definitely a good thing. And also, yes, you'll notice that by this point I

had completely abandoned my philosophy of just letting things play out and living in the moment. But in my defense, how can you even do that? Anyone who's even remotely involved in something like this, something emotional and real, is kind of fucked from the beginning, so I don't feel too bad in hindsight.

"You're dismissed" shouted one of the prefects sitting behind us. I flinched. My time was done? I breathed out and let my shoulders roll down in agony as I stood up and stretched my feet for the first time in three hours. Heaven. In the last three hours I had managed to bring it all full circle; experiencing both a slice of hell and a little nibble of heaven.

I strolled out the door with my bag on my back, ready to go down to main road and take a taxi straight to Evan's house. Despite me getting in trouble with the school, Theresa had allowed me to go out anyways, stating that as long it didn't happen again, she would let it slide and not tell my parents. Which I was fine by, trust me, it's not that I was scared of my parents, but they tended to reign down on me with an iron grip whenever I got into trouble. Which I guess I *should* be appreciative of because it did mean they actually cared, but still, I didn't need to have *that* conversation the evening before a night out.

As I waved my hand at one of the many taxis driving past, I started planning ahead, thinking about the best ways to get back at Ms. Cliffords. And by now you're probably thinking I'm a special breed of idiot, but as I already told you, this was a war, and though we were one for one on the battle tally, I was hell bent on getting ahead.

I plotted, plotted her downfall and her ultimate demise. I was surprised at myself, I had never felt such hate for anyone before. Actually, I wouldn't even call it hate, rather a magnetic pull to right the wrong that was how she dealt with students. She made my blood boil. And even then, I knew that she was dangerous to deal with. If you try and make a fire warmer, you might just get burnt. If you go to a bee's nest and poke it, the chances are you might get stung. That's just how life worked, and maybe if I'd listened to that little voice at the back of my head telling me to stop and leave it be, then maybe I wouldn't have spent my second last day at Bergford sitting for ten hours in detention, a record of all time according to Evan. But more on that later (Ooooh, foreshadowing).

I got in the taxi and gave my six rand to the driver, sitting in the chair closest to the door. I put my earphones into my ears and switched on my music as I watched the buildings of Cape Town whizz by me. The leaves were already starting to regrow. The road was, for Friday afternoon

standards relatively empty, and as the taxi stopped and dropped me off, the last specs of annoyance remaining from the distasteful detention slowly disappeared. I inhaled the fresh air around me, cracked my back and walked towards Evan's, ready for the night.

*Ding dong. Ding dong.* The doorbell rang as I waited expectantly outside.

"It's about bloody time you got here! Three hours of detention can only take *so long!*" exclaimed Evan jokingly, as he opened the door to greet me.

"Yeah well if it seemed long for you, imagine how it was for me. Fuck detention, man" I replied, giving him a hug and walking straight into his room.

I let my bags fall down to the floor and started changing. Another minute in the hot, sweaty uniform and I might just have thrown up on it to render it useless for future detentions. 8:00-15:00 was one thing, 8:00-16:00 was another, but 8:00-18:00, wearing the same shirt, and the same blazer, and the same shoes, and the same pants, while constantly baking beneath the African sun... THAT, was something no one should experience!

I emerged from the bedroom to meet Evan in the kitchen, and as I took my first step towards my destination, Emily's bedroom door burst open, and I was rapidly embraced by those soft and well cared for arms. Why? Why did she have to looks so beautiful all the time, just why?

"How was detention?" she asked, flashing that smile that just dazed me every time.

"It wasn't really a big deal" I stammered, shrugging my shoulders trying to be cool.

"Not a big deal? If I had three hours of detention I would have probably thrown myself off the school roof by the second hour! Three hours is so rough!" she said laughing, slapping my arm with the back of her hand ever so slightly. It's like I was trying to notice, it's like I was trying to make sure that she really was making physical contact with me. She was though, even if I was looking out for it, she definitely was!

"Well, I mean apart from my back feeling like it's forty years older, and my eyes pretty much boasting a brick wall screensaver, I think I'm feeling..." I paused in mock horror as my eyes looked above her head. "Wait... Shit, there's a brick on your head!"

She burst out laughing, clearly not caring that the joke was barely average. And that's what made me happy. Not the quality of my humor, because that was always shit when I was talking with her. It was that *I* was making her laugh, *I* was making her happy!

"You're so hilarious" she said, as she pulled me by the arm, and steered me towards the kitchen. "Grace and Layla are already here, I think more are coming in like half an hour."

I happily followed her and walked into the kitchen where Grace and Layla were sitting at the kitchen counter.

“Arlo, how are you?” shouted Layla as she wrapped her arms around me tightly and squeezed.

“I’m good, though I think I’m going to start a petition to get detention abolished. It just seems a little old fashioned to be perfectly honest,” I paused as I pretended to think something over in my head, “Anyways, whatever happened to stoning people?” Everyone but Evan tensed up. Whereas Emily, Layla and Grace stood there awkwardly, looking at me with empty expressions, Evan completely exploded with laughter, literal tears appearing in his eyes. It was hard to tell jokes in such a diverse crowd, you were never quite sure when too much would be too much. Most of the time you’d only know when you’d already fallen on your face and considering the fact that 25% of the audience found this particular joke funny was actually a pretty good turnout.

“So, who’s all still coming?” I asked, pretending I’d never made the joke in the first place.

Evan opened his mouth while straining to stop laughing, but Layla interrupted him.

“Well I can tell you that obviously Hannah is coming, otherwise Evan wouldn’t even be having a get together. Isn’t that right, Evan?” teased Layla. Evan groaned.

“I’m not *that* keen for her. I’d just really like to see her again” said Evan.

“Sure, more like you really want to hook up with her again” continued Layla.

“Wait what?” I asked. The bickering pair turned towards me.

“Didn’t you know?” asked Layla.

“Know what?”

“Evan hooked up with Hannah at my get together last weekend. And now he’s kind of in love with her” said Layla, sticking her tongue out at Evan.

I didn’t know that. Maybe it had something to do with me being preoccupied with jumping out of trees, but surely, I would have found out in the week after the get together?

“Piss off Layla, I’m not in love with her. She’s just the first girl in a long time, that I’ve found truly beautiful!” claimed Evan, earning himself a fresh round of giggles from the girls.

“Oh, she’s *beautiful!*” teased Layla. “I can’t wait till she hears *that!*”

Evan rolled his eyes and looked back at me. “Women bro. I swear if we COULD live without them, we would. There is no doubt in hell about that” I laughed with him, and soon the whole group was laughing.

“So apart from Hannah, who else is coming?” I tried again.

“The usual crew. James, Dylan, Scarlett, Tyler, Mia, Violet, Lauren. And some others. It should be like fifteen or twenty people total. A chilled night. Well, kind of chilled, we do have enough booze to give like forty teenagers alcohol poisoning, so it should also be a fun night” answered Evan smiling proudly.

I walked to the fridge where Emily was standing and opened the door.

“Anyone want a beer. Apparently, there’s plenty!” I said, my tone upbeat.

“Awe dude, good choice. It’s almost seven, we better start drinking!” said Evan getting up from his chair. We distributed the drinks amongst the group, handing out beers and dry ciders for the girls. We stood in a circle and kicked off the night.

“To a good night!” we clinked our bottles together and drank. We talked a little more and waited around for more people to come. And they came. Five or so minutes after we’d started drinking, the first new comer was announced by the ring of the doorbell. It was a night I would, never forget.

.....

“Tyler just came. He brought another liter of Vodka!” shouted someone from the entrance to Evan’s house. *This*, was something I had never seen in my entire life. And I was sixteen, I’d had sixteen years of extraordinary experiences, but *this* must have topped them all in one.

The Kitchen table was stock piled high, with spirits, beer and liquors of all sorts, and with every new arrival it seemed the quantity was only getting bigger. The quantity wasn’t what made it strange though. If I counted us all, there were about twenty to thirty of us. People from all over Cape Town, people from almost every school in the area, not just Bergford. But that’s just what it was. We were all school kids, all underage. And here was a bar that might have had the capacity to kill off Mel Gibson. Or maybe just subdue him for a little.

“How did you get Vodka?” I asked Tyler, greeting him as he came into the kitchen. Beer I would have thought would be reckoned with leniently at a bottle store, but something with 40 or whatever % alcohol in it? It couldn’t be that simple, could it?

“I bought it from the bottle store. Where else, my dude?” said Tyler. I was taken aback. Every day in South Africa I learnt something new, there was no doubt about that, but some things, like Tyler, who definitely did not look 18 or older, walking into a bottle store and buying himself a liter of Vodka, really caught me by surprise.

“And they didn’t even card you?” I asked. Tyler laughed.

“Dude I literally had my school uniform on. They even asked me how my day at school was.” He said laughing and placing the Vodka on the counter. “I don’t know if you know this Arlo. The fact of the matter is that they simply don’t give a shit and have way more serious crimes to deal with! Rape and murder or some fucked up 16-year old? You do the math, bro” said Tyler, grabbing a beer from the fridge. I watched him silently, nodding as he started drinking from his beer. And then Thomas Edison invented the lightbulb. BOOM.

*Beer.* I had just got an amazing idea. Beer had given me an amazing idea. Why hadn’t I thought of it before?

“Thank you so much!” I shouted, grabbing a six pack of Heineken from the table and carrying it out onto the veranda before Tyler could even reply. And maybe my haste was the error of my ways, but that’s probably an oversimplification if I’m honest.

As people had started showing up to the party, Evan approached me to ask for a favor.

“Hey man, so listen. I am actually pretty keen on Hannah, and though I don’t think anyone’s actually that much of a dick, it would be super cool if you could just make sure no one comes to cock block me when I’m alone with her. Can you do that?” he’d asked.

“Dude of course, not a problem. I’ll make sure of it!” I had replied smiling, genuinely happy to help. I guess it also felt good to be confided in, and when I had seen him earlier heading towards the back of the veranda with only Hannah in tow, I’d been ready to honor my promise. Now, however, a few drinks in and ultimately concentrated on being the center of attention, I not only forgot about the promise entirely, but deemed it necessary to break it myself. And it’s something that still messes me up when I think about it. The selfishness and disregard for others that had crept its way into my soul in barely three weeks. It frightens me. How easy it is for a human to change.

“Dude Evan! You have to come with me, right now!” I shouted, clearly interrupting the conversation they were having.

“I’ll come later” he said sternly, turning back to Hannah.

“No dude, come on, you have to come now” I insisted.

Evan paused before speaking again. “So, then my dad just got out of the car and told me to drive. I’d literally never driven before. Well, he realized that when I drove his new Range Rover into a ditch” said Evan, making Hannah laugh.

It took me a moment to realize that he’d ignored me. I should have gotten the message. He was busy, he was occupied, but I really wanted him to do this with me. I was convinced beyond a conceivable doubt that my idea was probably the best thing since sliced bread. And sliced bread is already the king of the... well sliced bread market I guess.

“Dude, I’m absolutely serious, if you don’t come with now, people are going to get hurt!” I raised my voice a little, trying to make the urgency apparent.

“People are going to get hurt?” asked Evan, directing his attention back at me.

“Well yeah, umm sure, it’s going to be bad if you don’t come!” I lied. Evan gritted his teeth before getting up, an action only barely visible beneath the night’s sky.

“Wait for me here, yeah?” asked Evan, smiling at Hannah.

She nodded and smiled back, giving Evan the reassurance he needed in order to come with me.

“Jesus Arlo, what the fuck? I thought you were going to be my wing man for the evening?” asked Evan, his voice sounding angry. I swallowed loudly as I looked for some kind of words to formulate into an explanation.

“Umm, I thought you were done with the conversation” I said dumbly.

“Arlo, I know you’re not that stupid. My conversation wouldn’t be finished unless my tongue was down her throat! Why the fuck dude?” he asked again, his voice darkly coarse.

My brain fumbled as the realization dawned on me. There was no excuse. There was just me being an asshole. And now I had to deal with it.

“Shit man I’m sorry. I didn’t really think about it” I said, looking guilty, well aware that my apology was not going to cut it.

“It’s not always about you, Arlo. I feel like sometimes you forget that. How would you have felt if I’d gone and dragged you away while you were talking with my sister?” he asked.

I gulped. What he said had hit me hard. I was suddenly forced to accept that what Evan was feeling for Hannah was obviously a lot stronger than everyone seemed to think. And if it had happened to me, I would have probably been a lot less level headed about it.

“I would have felt like shit.” I admitted. Evan nodded.

“That’s what I thought. Now what was so important that you had to drag me out here so urgently?” asked Evan. I shamefully led him towards the center of the veranda where I’d left the six-pack of beer for my plan.

“What do you know about beer ball?” I asked, handing him three beers.

“Beer ball? You mean beer pong?” asked Evan in return. I shook my head.

“No mate, beer *ball*” I responded. Evan thought it over in his head.

“I’m assuming it’s a drinking game. So that’s essentially telling me that you broke your promise to me, for a drinking game.”

I smiled awkwardly. I would have to let the comments slide till he cooled off, especially since I knew that I was in the wrong. I’d made the promise and I’d broken it. Fair enough.

“Take these three beers and set them up at that end of the Veranda” I said, pointing to the end, closest to the door. The area was about seven meters away, from where we were standing, and for a game of beer ball, it was just the right amount.

“Make sure each bottle is about half a meter apart, and that they’re standing parallel to the back wall. Then pick two players and I’ll explain how it works. I have a feeling you’ll be good at this” I said, smiling a little more confidently, hoping that I was right and Evan wouldn’t stay mad after the game had begun. He would enjoy this. Who wouldn’t enjoy this? Everyone would enjoy this. I was a genius.

I went to the opposite end, where Hannah was still sitting, and set up my three bottles, an equal seven meters away from the center. I opened them all and ran back to Evan, handing him the bottle opener and telling him to open his three.

“What happens then?” asked Evan, as I rushed on inside to gather the last requirements for the game.

“Just find your two people!” I shouted back.

My eyes started darting around the kitchen. Where did Evan keep his water bottles? Just a plastic water bottle was all I needed, didn’t every household possess such a thing?

BING to the GO. My hands clasped around the 2-liter plastic water bottle which seemed to have been used to down something, the heavy stench of cheap Vodka giving its secrets away.

I filled it about a quarter of the way up, making sure it weighed just about enough to stand on its own. Mission accomplished. The game could begin. Or, almost that was. One last thing, and

luckily for me there was an excessive amount of that one thing I needed. Beer bottles. An empty one to be more precise, and for me the question wasn't where I would find one, the question was rather which one would I take.

I grabbed an empty Heineken, thinking it was only fitting considering we would be drinking the same type. I rushed outside with both things in my hand and walked back to the center where I placed the empty beer bottle, smack in the middle.

"What happens now?" asked Evan, approaching me with the bottle opener still clasped in his hand.

"Get rid of the bottle opener for a start" I said, "And then gather your team. Meet me in the middle."

I needed a team. This hadn't occurred to me, but as soon as it dawned on me, I knew exactly who I wanted.

She was standing with a group of her friends, not so far from the place that Evan's team would be standing, and she looked as always, like a lone star in the brilliant night's sky.

I knew what I wanted. It couldn't have been clearer. I wanted her and for the first time in my life, I didn't feel like I was going to mess it up. I waltzed on over, with my chin held high. My shoulders were rolled back and if my mom saw the posture I was upholding, she would praise me and say I looked beautiful.

"Emily?" I said, a confident look welcoming her eyes.

"Oh hey Arlo, what's up?" she replied, giving me a hug and one of her typical smiles. It had become a routine, or maybe I had made it a routine. Always the hug first and then she would smile. And when she smiled, space and time would no longer matter, particles would vanish, all that would be left, were the shapes her lips were making, soothing, wonderful and amazing. And I would feel those things too, I would feel soothed, amazed and wondrous, for if I could make a girl like that smile at me, nothing in the world could matter to me more.

"I need two players for beer ball and I think you would be a great addition to the Arlo team. You look like you can really handle your beer balls" I said, winking as if to clarify that I was making a joke. Whether I was trying to make it sound perverted, or whether it just came out perverted, Emily took it in a perverted way.

“What is that supposed to mean?” she asked, frowning slightly as her smile took its leave of absence. I shook my head, ever so slightly, chastising myself for trying so hard to be the funny guy.

“I’m just kidding, that sounded really wrong” I said, feebly trying to rescue myself.

“Yeah. Yeah it did” she replied. There was a pause. A long pause, a pause that can really only be described as an awkward pause. “So, what’s beer ball?” she asked, saving us both from the awkwardness of the pause.

I took a deep breath, trying to focus on not making a fool of myself. “It’s a German drinking game. I’ll explain all the rules in just a moment, but I need you on my team. I would *like* you on my team” I said. She smiled at that, how hard could it be, Arlo? Just be completely honest with her!

“Well if you want me on your team then I better say yes. I wouldn’t want to lose out to the countless other girls that you’d like to have on your team” she said, smiling again.

“I don’t want any other girls...” I started, catching myself before I finished. I saw what was going on here. She was flirting back to me. Except she was rather good at it, or at least she was better than me, which yes, wasn’t hard to achieve.

“I mean, yes I definitely want you on my team” I said, receiving another warm smile from her, despite me doing everything I could to destroy the steamy atmosphere.

“Go to the middle of the veranda where the empty Heineken is standing,” I said, pointing to her destination. “I’ll be there in a moment, I just need to get our third player.”

She nodded and started walking towards the designated meeting point. Excitement was building rapidly within me, partially for the drinking game and partially for being able to spend time with Emily.

I looked around at the faces of different people, looking for someone I was relatively close with, who would go on my team. *Dylan*. Dylan was definitely the third player I wanted.

I headed over to where he was standing and was surprised to see he was talking alone with Clara, a girl who was apparently part of “the crew”, but hadn’t been in school for the last two months due to sickness.

I approached the duo cautiously, not wanting to make the same mistake I had with Evan, deciding that having one of my bros mad at me was just about bad enough. I crept up silently, trying to detect in the flow of their conversation whether they were chisizing or not.

“And so she can’t eat any gluten, because gluten is bad for her. If she eats any gluten she’ll be sick for a few weeks or so, that’s why all we really eat at my house is granola. Lots and lots of granola. And if we want to eat something with gluten in it, we have to eat it outside with the dogs, which isn’t entirely bad because they’re nice dogs, and they don’t like gluten either so they don’t try to steal your food” said Dylan, nodding his head as he talked. I decided that if he and Clara were chising, then it was a very peculiar form of chising indeed. Never would I ever dream to mention the dangers of gluten while chising a girl. But as I thought about this I also realized that I wasn’t very good at chising in general, and so I wasn’t really one to judge. As a side note I did decide to try out the gluten card in the future, maybe Dylan was onto something.

“Hey Dylan” I said softly, carefully treading the waters and attempting to keep the obvious excitement out of my voice.

“Hey Arlo buddy, what’s up?” he replied, turning his head towards me. His voice gave *nothing* away. If he wanted me to go, his voice was hiding it well. If he wanted me to take him away, his voice was hiding it well. Actually, the more I think about it now, Dylan’s voice seldom showed any emotion whatsoever. When he laughed, it was clear, when he cried everyone understood, but when he simply talked, no one knew what was going on in that brain of his. Dylan the enigma. Dylan the wise.

“I was wondering if you were busy.” I asked carefully, giving him a look that I hoped he’d understand along the lines of; Are you busy chising Clara?

He paused and read my expression slowly.

“I suppose I’m not if you require my services” he responded, choosing his words carefully as though he was making sure he wouldn’t say anything wrong to either Clara or me. It annoyed me a little, I won’t deny it. It was as if he was forcefully trying to make me the bad guy. If Clara didn’t mind him going, it would be my fault, if Clara wanted him to stay, it would also be my fault. Dylan had chosen the perfect harmony that whatever I decided on, and whoever it may annoy or sadden, it would be my fault. *Cheers for that Dylan.*

“Well I wanted to play a game of Beer ball, and I need one more player. Do you want to be that one player?” I asked, deciding that being direct was my best option at that point.

“Depends how badly you want me.” Now he was playing me. This wise asshole was straight up playing me like a fiddle. I groaned.

“Dylan. You’re coming with me now to play beer ball” I said, giving up and taking him by the arm. I gave Clara an apologetic look, but she seemed to be less bothered than Dylan. Either she didn’t care, or she was just as good if not better than Dylan at hiding her emotions.

“Dude what the hell is your problem? I was chising her!” protested Dylan as we neared the center of the veranda.

I stopped, dead in my tracks and looked at him with a frustrated glance. “Are you actually kidding me? Why didn’t you just say so for God’s sake? I felt like I was talking to an orange. Actually, an orange might have given me more input!” I said, giving him an annoyed look. I accepted that I was wrong with Evan, seriously, I felt super bad about it, but Dylan could not be angry at me for this.

“Dude!” said Dylan angrily.

“What?” I replied.

“Dude... I’m just messing with you!” said Dylan, laughing out loud and pointing at my face. “Dude your face! Chill! Loosen up a little!”

I shook my head, exhausted, contemplating if all this effort was actually worth a game of beer ball. It wasn’t Dylan’s fault, normally I’d have found it funny, but on that evening after the Evan situation, his joke came across as kind of tasteless.

We arrived at the empty Heineken bottle where Emily and Evan were waiting expectantly.

“No surprise you picked my sister” said Evan, his tone flat in a spiteful manner. My cheeks flushed red with embarrassment as soon as he’d said it and I avoided looking at Emily to see her reaction. This was going so horribly it was kind of funny.

“Who are your team mates?” I asked, trying to maintain a happy go vibe.

“Hannah and Layla. I take it yours are Emily and Dylan?” he asked in return.

I nodded. And then in my exasperated state I decided to make everything four times worse than it already was. I pushed the big red button even though there shouldn’t have been a button for me to push in the first place. I mean I realize that now that I should stray far away from any such buttons, but I didn’t know that then. In fact, admittedly, in an awful kind of way, it was hilarious as it was unbearably awkward.

“You know Evan, girls with beautiful eyes usually can’t drink as fast as the next person. But that is what you said, right? That Hannah’s *eyes* were, *big* and *beautiful*? Or were you talking about something else haha, if you know what I mean?”

No one laughed. No one said anything. In fact, the only thing to come out of an absolutely awful attempt at humor was Evan's face turning an even brighter shade of red than mine had just a moment before. His face grew cold as it became obvious he was holding back the urge to punch me.

I don't know why I said it, in fact, I should have been aware that saying anything at all to Evan at that point in time was more than a stupid idea, regardless of what the content might be. But something inside me was indifferent, inconsiderate of what consequences I might be faced with. The people I had met at Bergford had made me feel like a king. For the first time in my life I was surrounded by friends, friends that liked me and enjoyed having me around. And it had gone straight to my head. Not that that was any excuse, but simplifying it to you just being a dick, is actually pretty hard even when you're trying to stick to the truth. So, I tried to make a sexist joke about my best friend's chise's breasts, and it led me exactly to where I deserved to end up. The place where comedy goes to die.

"Just explain how the game works" grumbled Evan, teeth clenched.

"Sure" I said. The eyes that had watched me with interest moments before, now shifted awkwardly between Evan and me, trying to figure out what was going on between us.

"Ok, so basically both teams go to where the bottles are set up. Evan, Hannah and Layla down there," I pointed to the back of the veranda, "And Emily, Dylan and me over here" I pointed in the opposite direction.

"Then each team takes turns of throwing the plastic water bottle at the empty beer bottle. If my team manages to knock over the beer bottle, we get to drink as fast as we can while one member of your team runs to the middle and stands the beer bottle up again. We stop drinking when the bottle is standing again and all your team members are back at your point of origin. And vice versa obviously, if you hit over the bottle then we have to stand it up. Does everyone get it?" I asked, wondering still if abandoning the game was still an option.

"Yeah it makes sense... But what's so bloody special about it? Why did everyone have to stop what they were doing to come here?" asked Evan. I gulped. I didn't have a good answer, in fact another few hundred awful and aggressive jokes kept popping into my head, but *nothing* to help me salvage a clearly awful situation.

"Well I thought you guys would all enjoy it, and it's German so I thought I could show you something we play in Berlin you know." I was clambering at the thinnest possible ledge, much

like Mufasa in the lion king if you disregard the fact that Mufasa is an angel and a modern-day hero, and I was just being the literal embodiment of a teenage dirtbag.

Everyone fell silent. I had destroyed the atmosphere like the Americans had destroyed much of the Middle East. And just like president Bush accidentally realized in 2004, the world would be better off if I left this party. No seriously, he said that. “These people are trying to shake the will of the Iraqi citizens, and they want us to leave...I think the world would be better off if we did leave...” – George W. Bush, 2004.

“Well it sounds fun...” started Emily only to be interrupted by Evan.

“Fine let’s play then” he said bluntly.

I looked around awkwardly not sure what to do. “We don’t have to play if you guys don’t want to. I just thought it would be cool...” I started.

“Shut up, Arlo. We’re going to play your stupid bloody game now and you’re going to enjoy it,” said Evan.

I nodded and started walking to where my team would start. I needed to get drunk quickly and I needed to get drunk now. The worst part about knowing you’ve messed up is when you can’t do anything to change it. I had really messed up with Evan.

“Can you throw well?” I asked Emily, trying to make conversation despite the obvious tension.

“Not really that well, but I guess I can try for you” she said, smiling weakly. I was stunned, how could a girl like that *still* be interested in me. Wasn’t there a point of no going back? Didn’t that point start somewhere with being an atrocious human being?

“Think of it this way. If you don’t knock over the bottle, we don’t get a chance to get drunk. And then what’s the whole point in the game?” I said, trying to be funny. She smiled a little more and readied her aim to launch the plastic bottle.

And then we played. Back and forth, drinking slowly but surely, a heated battle quickly ensuing. Just because I had been at fault didn’t mean I wasn’t playing to win. I mean I considered it, throwing the game for some vain attempt of correcting my mistake. But instead I opted for trying to impress the girl of my dreams, flooding myself into an intensity that mirrored Bobby Fischer, even if a drinking game wasn’t quite as comparable as a world series chess tournament.

I was the first to finish my beer, and as I took a step back to watch the rest of the game unfold, I observed for the first time that the tension had at least decreased, even if only accidentally.

Evan and I eyed each other as our team mates continued, but as he finished I could see that he was noticing the fun of the game too. It was becoming impossible to ignore.

Considering that Hannah and Emily were considerably average in the art of downing alcoholic beverages, the small crowd that had gathered outside the playing field focused on Layla and Dylan, who were both neck and neck to finish third. I thanked my lucky stars as Hannah missed the bottle, forfeiting her team's turn to Dylan who wasn't going to miss. He didn't disappoint. After a modest applause he walked on over to me and high fived me with gusto.

"We gonna win my boy. This is solid stuff!" he said, smiling at me before we both turned back to the ongoing game, hoping that Emily could lead us to victory.

Layla was next to finish, storming off the playing field in apparent discontent of being unable to beat the boys. After flinging a few slurred curse words in our general direction, she smiled and laughed before collapsing onto a spectator's chair, seemingly having moved onto finishing her next drink.

Emily had the upper hand. She simply needed to knock the beer bottle over and the victory would be ours. The amount of beer she had left in her bottle was negligible, I mean seriously, you could have finished it with only a table spoon in hand.

The crowd quietened, everyone was fixated on Emily and the bottle. Emily and the bottle, those were the only two entities that mattered in that moment. My breath slowed, so did everyone else's, I hoped only for the best, I hoped for the victory. And then she threw, with a graceful swing and the eruption of laughter that followed her actions, made the defeat that followed taste so much worse. It was not a good way to go. If I wasn't so completely insane for her, I'd even call it embarrassing.

Emily threw the bloody bottle backwards. BACKWARDS! As in, not even remotely in the direction of her target. But I had to laugh too, the look of absolute confusion that formed on her face, was for lack of a better word, priceless. Priceless and beautiful, but that didn't help her throwing.

"That did just happen, right?" asked Dylan, laughing so hard that tears were springing in his eyes. "That actually just happened!"

"I guess there go our chances of winning the game" I said, smiling at Dylan in return. "Don't worry Emily, there's always next time! I'm just glad you weren't throwing a grenade."

She looked back at me and smiled awkwardly, as though she couldn't believe herself that she had done what she had done. She shook her head and positioned herself to run for the bottle, wanting to redeem herself, to prove that she wasn't the useless athlete everyone now thought her to be. The laughter died out as Hannah readied her arm to throw.

The beer bottle fell to the floor with a hollow clunk as Hannah effortlessly emptied the remainder of her beer, down her throat, like water. Emily was stunned as cheers erupted for the winning team, and as she turned around to walk over to me and Dylan, her expression of shock melted into an amused look of mock guilt.

She shrugged her shoulders and threw her hands up with that "I swear, I'm innocent" look. I smiled at her.

"Were you trying to make us lose?" I asked jokingly.

"What, why would you even ask that?" she replied, sounding offended.

"Well it was hilarious if nothing else," I admitted, "and I've been trying to be funny the entire evening, so you can take my word for it!"

She punched me gently on the arm and gave me a cheeky grin. "You just wanted to beat my brother, don't even lie."

I shrugged my shoulders and gave an accepting nod. "It was good competition, what can I say. I couldn't just let him win."

"So, you just wanted to beat me?" asked Evan, who had crept up next to me while I was talking with Emily.

I turned to face him, knowing that I had to apologize now, knowing that this chance now was one I had to take. I looked him dead in the eyes, trying to be as genuine as I could.

"I'm sorry for being such a dick earlier. I don't know what came over me. I know that's not really an excuse, but still, I'm sorry for saying the things I did, not to mention the other, eh, thing." I said. His eyes stared into the depths of my soul. I tried not to flinch, but it was kind of creepy.

"It didn't really seem like you, Arlo. Don't let it happen again" he said finally, pulling me into a hug. As he left, my brain satisfied with the resolution of the conflict but my gut warning me that it wasn't quite over, my surroundings blurred as a tunnel vision set in and immersed me, as the most important moment of my entire short life was about to take place. Being left there, alone

with Emily, I knew what I had to do, it was now or never. And in my brain formed an idea, an idea which I still use in the present tense, even though I know I should probably try something new.

I took Emily's hand, into my own and through a connection formed with our eyes I poured my entire being into her.

"Emily come with me, I want to tell you a story" I tugged at her hand, gently. She nodded and smiled and allowed me to lead the way. My heart started thumping, to think that I wasn't even that drunk and I had managed to get her to follow me. This was the deciding moment in young Arlo's life, this was the moment where particles would race together and explode in a fiery light.

I walked her down the veranda, into the kitchen and up the stairs into the main corridor. I opened the door that I knew led to the living room, turning on the lights as I stepped inside. It was empty. The room was empty, and my excitement was to some extent palpable in more ways than I can remember.

But, had I looked back, had I looked back only once while I was leading her to the room, only once, I would have noticed Evan staring at me with hawk like eyes, a sly smile etched into his face. That's all it would have taken, one look back.

## Chapter 12: Well that escalated quickly - drugs

I closed the door behind us, and sat down on the couch, still holding hands with Emily. The eerie silence that seemed to follow me everywhere, crept up behind us and waited patiently. The few shreds of outrageous confidence I had managed to conjure out of thin air, suddenly disappeared faster than my dreams of becoming a famous author. Ouch.

I had planned it so well. I mean, there wasn't any planning really needed, it was kind of one plus one at this point. Take her to the room, make sure it's empty, sit down on the couch, and kiss her. I was 75% done, it was pretty much smooth sailing from here, right?

"What did you want to tell me?" asked Emily, biting her lip ever so slightly and fluttering her eyelids as she spoke. I knew those signs, I knew what they meant. Or rather, if I'm to be honest, I had taught myself what they meant after numerous searches on google and how cast; "How to know when to kiss a girl" & "How to know if she's interested in you." But still, I knew those signs, Google or no Google, it was still knowledge, and I had at least some of it.

"I don't even have a story to be honest, I was just making an excuse to get you alone with me" I said, surprised that words were breaking laws of physics to formulate in my mouth.

"Why did you want me alone?" asked Emily, moving the teensiest bit closer to me on the couch. And that threw me off completely, like what, a female is moving towards me, shut down, shut down, system error, do anything but be normal...

"I can't remember but I might as well tell you a story now!" I blurted, stopping five centimeters short of the finish line and regrettably starting to improvise.

"Oh," she said, "Oh, OK then". She was disappointed, I'm not making it up. I had planned it so well, I had built the perfect lead up. It was like having rose petals on the floor and scented candles on the counter. Love me Tender could have been playing on the radio and all I had to do, was bloody well kiss her. Instead, I took down the candles, set the dry and dead rose petals on fire, and played Love the Way you Lie by Eminem on the radio while I watched it all burn down. It wasn't even the best the song to watch the world burn, but I put it on anyways.

"So what did you want to tell me?" she asked when I didn't say anything for a moment or two. I blinked a few times focusing on her lips and wanting to lean in. I looked back up at her eyes and lost myself all over again. I said the only thing that came to my mind.

"Have I told you before how beautiful your eyes are?" I asked, admiring them under the artificial lights that ignited the living room.

She shook her head slowly and smiled. She didn't say anything, she didn't need to say anything the message was clear. I leaned in, my pulse raced faster than a Formula 1 racer, for the first time in my life I understood what true anticipation was. As I neared her lips and she in turn neared mine, the sheer anticipation of two parties meeting, forming a beautiful union, swept over me. Anticipation, the drums within my chest banged harder and the lungs beneath the drums stopped still. No breath was taken, everything stood still.

But our lips did not connect. No union was to be formed in that moment for all too suddenly my lungs were forced back into action as the door of the living room was burst wide open, to reveal no other than Evan standing in the doorway, smiling immensely.

"Evan, what the fu—" started Emily, thunder in her voice. But Evan cut her off, ignoring her completely, indifferent to his sister's angered tone.

"Arlo, you have to come with me quickly. Trust me you're not going to want to miss out on this" he said, walking over to me and taking me by the hand. Anger flashed, hot behind my eyes, I wanted to strangle him, I wanted to shoo him out of the room and get right back to where I'd just been. I wanted to kiss her, I'd been about to bloody kiss her!

"I'd rather just stay here" I said forcefully, trying to remove myself from Evan's metallic grip. He didn't budge.

"Trust me Arlo, people are going to get hurt if you don't come with me right now" he said, making me realize that he was mocking me, oblivious to Emily who had no idea what was going on.

"Evan just piss off" she said frustrated. She wanted me to stay, it had all been so perfect, and she was willing to give me another chance, right then and there. But it wasn't so simple. I knew if I wanted to be even with Evan, he wanted me to suffer the same fate he had before. It was terrible. He was supposed to be my friend, and what kind of a person was he to demand I pay the same price as him?

I racked my brain trying to find any possible likeable outcome to the situation at hand. There was a whole load of nothing.

I glanced sadly at Emily, hoping she'd understand, hoping she'd know without any exchange of words that I wanted to be there with her. I sighed.

"OK, so what's so pressing?" I asked as I headed to the doorway to encourage Evan to leave.

“Arlo,” I turned back to look at her once more. “Please stay with me”.

There it was, that line out of a movie, the one that made my heart throb and hate Evan even more. Hate is a strong word, despise is too, but what I felt for Evan in that very moment was a distinct combination of the two, fueling the fires of my anger.

“I’ll be back in like five minutes. I promise, Emily” I smiled at her. It was the only time in my entire life, that I’d made a promise worth keeping. It was an oath bonded by the truth of my intentions, and I had had every meaning of keeping it.

I turned around and walked out of the living room, finally being released by Evan’s claws. I didn’t even know what to say to him. He had betrayed me, what I had done to him was bad, but what he had done to me was worse. Spread bad Karma and you get bad Karma back, that’s how it’s supposed to work. But Evan had made sure I got worse karma than I deserved, he had made himself the judge, jury and executioner, and what he had given to me, without thinking it over was no less justice than it was a crime.

“I guess you’re proud of that, are you? I guess you’re proud of ruining every last chance I had with your sister?” I asked, spitting the words out with fiery anger.

He smiled when I said that, laughing at my reaction. He slowed down his pace and looked me straight in the eyes again, making me uneasy.

“You mean, when you interrupted my chise after promising to make sure no one did, it was OK because we played a game of beer ball afterwards? But now I want to get you for something and it’s suddenly not OK? I just want to be clear that you think you can do whatever you want in *my* house, that’s all, Arlo” he whispered, his voice dangerously low and aggressive.

“I think you know the difference. I apologized, you accepted it. That should have been the end of it” I replied, squaring him up as he had done to me.

“Oh, that *should* have been the end of it? Well maybe you *should* have thought about that before you talked about Hannah’s boobs and made me out to be a sexist pig you dickhead.” said Evan raising his voice and glaring at me.

The tension was real as we both realized that there was nothing left before us keeping us from clawing at each other’s throats. Not that physically fighting would be a good thing, as soon as I threw a punch I would know and everyone else would know it too, Arlo’s not a fighter. But I was aggravated enough to ignore the obvious, I was aggravated enough to punch him in his stupid face.

And then it all just melted away. My feelings of hatred, the urge to punch him, they all just drifted away with the wind as it suddenly became clear to me how this whole conflict had started in the first place. I was trying to impress a girl, and in a way, so was Evan. We'd both lost ourselves over two girls. In fact, I'd become the human version of a piece a shit, Evan also did, but I had started the whole thing in his defense.

"This is about two girls. Holy shit. I've been an asshole, haven't I?" I asked, accepting the truth and backing away slightly. Evan noticeably relaxed as well, his face softening as he nodded.

"You're my bloody friend, Arlo, I like having you as a friend. But I can tell you now without hesitation, if you pull shit like that again, you're going to lose all the friends you've made. This is the last time, Arlo. I've got better thing to do than be friends with the dick head exchange student." He walked away, heading onto the veranda, the tension evaporating as he took his leave.

I knew what I had to do. There were practically neon arrows pointing in his direction, teasing me to follow him. I looked back behind me at the door to the living room, knowing that I couldn't go back there if I wanted Evan to forgive me. I stared for a minute or so, the clock was ticking, I couldn't really hear it but I knew it was ticking nevertheless. One, two, one, two, back, forth, back, forth. Had I known following him would ruin my last chance, maybe I would have stayed and tried to salvage the friendship later. But something pulled me, maybe the fear of becoming so enthralled in Emily again that it interfered with all my friendships, maybe I was just bound to do something so stupid. Whatever it was, I followed Evan.

I arrived on the veranda, and spotted Evan at the back, standing in a circle with Layla, Hannah and Grace. I walked over, not entirely sure what I could do to better quell the situation. That's how the whole night had been so far. Me making unprecedented mistakes and then trying random things that came from my gut to make them better.

"I see Evan is pimping again" I said, including myself in the circle between Layla and Grace, opposite Evan. The three girls laughed, Evan didn't. Or at least it's not like he didn't laugh at all, it's more like he grunted a little and his lips formed a small smile. He was obviously *trying* not to laugh.

"What are you guys doing back here?" I asked.

"Well we were about to smoke a joint when Evan said we should wait for you. So, he went in and fetched you. And now I think we're going to smoke that joint. I feel like smoking a joint now" said Grace. So, Evan hadn't been lying entirely, part of him had really wanted to fetch me,

same as I had wanted to fetch him earlier that evening. It was the same thing, I had just been in too much of a haze to realize it.

“Shit sorry” I said, mainly directed at Evan.

“Its fine, we weren’t that desperate anyways” said Grace, thinking I was apologizing for coming late for the joint. She laughed and so did Layla. “Now it’s about high time that we got high as shit!”

Evan still stared at me, shaking his head with very small movements, and took out a lighter from his jacket pocket.

“Let’s get high,” was all he said in agreement, handing the lighter over to Hannah, “Ladies first.”

She took the lighter and lit the joint which she had placed between her lips, taking the first hit and inhaling deeply. That’s when it hit me, so to speak, where I was standing, and what that position entailed. I was standing in the stoner circle, but what I hadn’t realized was by standing here I had agreed to smoke, something I hadn’t really done before, at least not this sober.

I looked nervously as the joint approached me, watching first Evan smoke, and then Layla thereafter. She passed the joint in my direction and without giving it another thought, I decided it would be easier to make up with Evan if we were both a little stoned, and happier about life. I never forgot about the promise I made, in fact I was completely dedicated to keeping it, even as I inhaled the harsh smoke, but I hoped that five minutes could drag out quite a bit longer than they usually did. I definitely had a minute left, I probably even had two minutes left. I’d make it back in time and I’d still get Emily by the end of the night. It was going to be easy, right?

I dragged on the filter, pulling more of the smoke into my mouth, engulfing my tonsils. I took the joint out of my lips and inhaled the smoke. Cough. My mind begged me to cough, as a thousand little hands started scratching at the back of my throat, the THC gradually invading my system. And so I coughed, I coughed for a few seconds and then I took a second hit, and passed the joint on, over to Grace.

I was surprised by how quickly I noticed the effects starting, I didn’t have to think about it, I was just completely self-aware. But I wasn’t. I thought I was, that much is true, but what was happening was completely new, it was something I had never ever experienced. Time was slower, and yet it was faster. The joint arrived back to me and in no time at all I was wondering if time

even existed or was simply a construct of our imagination. I took two more hits, and two more again when the joint came around once more.

“Whose weed is this?” I asked. My voice sounded strange, it sounded like it was coming from a speaker, low and echoey, not from my mouth. But where does the voice usually come from? The mouth is just something to guide it, just like religion is a guide for our wellbeing. Those were the thoughts coursing through my brain. I wanted to understand, I wanted to be able to realize everything. It was some hella trippy shit. And I was loving it.

“It was lying on the kitchen counter, I assumed it was for everyone” said Evan, laughing as he spoke as though everything was a joke. I let the words find their place in my mind. Kitchen, counter, assumption, everyone. The words jumbled together like a salad, not knowing where to ground themselves, not knowing if they were in the right place.

“I thought you said it was yours?” asked Layla her voice sounding distant, making it hard to believe that she was standing a mere thirty centimeters to my left.

Left and right. Right and left. What exactly was the point for direction, direction was just a word we use to pretend we know where we’re going.

“It doesn’t matter if you’re on my left or right, we’re all going straight ahead” I said, like it was the perfect answer for her every question. The people in the circle looked at me, laughing as though my thoughts made no sense. I called them people because they looked like something else, they looked like they were special, something humans could not understand yet. True beauty, their every fiber was shining like the sun.

“It does make sense” I whispered, my eyes growing wide and starting off a fresh round of laughter for the people around me. They didn’t understand, they couldn’t see as I could see, they had no idea.

“Arlo dude, it’s just weed chill your bloody balls” said Evan, a smile on his face that made me remember the names of these people. Evan was mad at me, but then when it came down to it we were all really mad, emotions were just blankets we liked to cover ourselves up in, so we would forget that we’re actually blank canvasses, ready to be painted on by whoever wants to.

“Entrapment of psychology. I want to write a book called entrapment of psychology!” I exclaimed. They laughed again, I wasn’t trying to be funny, I just wanted to share with these wonderful beings that I wanted to write a book!

“Dude Arlo, are you OK man? You seem really effing stoned!” said Hannah, taking me by surprise as it was the first time that evening that we’d actually spoken. *Arlo*. What a strange word? My name? Yes, it was my name, but it was so much more. It was a description. It was an introduction. I was Arlo and Arlo were me.

“I am, Arlo. You are Hannah.” My eyes widened even more as I started to feel a great warmth in my stomach.

“Arlo do you need to sit down? You’re sort of swaying from side to side” said Layla, giggling like it was the funniest thing she’d ever seen. I shook my head and smiled at her.

“Sit down, because I’m swaying?” I laughed just as they did. “Would you take a boat out of the water just because it’s swaying? This boat feels great!” I licked my lips, the feeling of the great rainfall hitting a cracked and dried up canyon for the first time, washing over me as I licked them repetitively.

And that’s when the first hallucinations entered my field of vision.

I was looking at Layla, still licking my lips, wondering why I was the only one who understood, the only one who knew everything and everyone. Her nose slid, her mouth opened and soon the nose was gone and replaced by emptiness.

“Your nose, Layla your nose, bring it back!” I shouted. She put her hand to her face and touched the place where her nose should be.

“Arlo, its right here” she took my hand and placed it on her face. She wanted to prove to me that her nose was still there, she wanted to prove to me that I was imaging things. But my hand went through her face and I jumped back in obvious bewilderment.

“How did you do that?” I gasped. Sounds were ringing in the perimeter around me, sounds that could be laughter but were too unfamiliar to be certain.

“Arlo relax, what did I do?” she asked, her face being shaken by a force unknown to me. And then she said words. Words that I cannot repeat because I can’t remember them. Words that sounded beautiful but from a language humans had yet to discover.

I ran away. Away from the circle and away from the scenery. The veranda had become an ocean of materials, something I couldn’t swim in but knew to be in liquid form. The closer I came to the door the further away it seemed. Every step became yet another adventure, my body was buzzing as I felt like I was being transported. And then I stepped through the door, suddenly it had

come to me and I didn't have to walk anymore. I stumbled, walking past the kitchen counter and sitting down on the living room couch.

As soon as my bum landed on the couch, the living room disappeared, and everything changed almost at once. It was probably the last few seconds of the five minutes I'd given myself, but to be perfectly honest that didn't matter anymore. Because there was no Emily to get back to, no door to the living room, nothing. I had broken through.

When I think back to the experience, I find it nearly impossible to recreate just how fast and how slowly all of this was happening. I couldn't even distinguish between the two. It was all interchangeable and terrifying, it's actually a wonder that I managed to stay as level headed as I did.

So, anyways, everything changed, and I mean that literally as I was teleported somewhere into a dome like building. Then the Elves came.

My eyes were open, I was completely self-aware, and all of that together made it so much harder to believe what I was seeing. I was stoned, I knew that, I was pretty damn high, but I wasn't tripping on any other drug, I had definitely not taken any other drug. I mean I would have realized if I'd taken something else, I'd never done anything else in my entire life, I would have realized it, would I not? And so, suddenly as it seemed, reality itself had changed, not my perception of it. I was high, high as a kite, but how could I explain what I was seeing?

They came in pairs, twenty in total, dressed in forest green robes and faces too beautiful to describe. Their ears were pointed, it was the only give away that they weren't from earth, the magical aura that surrounded their entire being, made them seem powerful and archaic, something from a fairy tale, something too fantastic to exist. And then they approached me, one by one, giving me gifts they had brought with, gifts that seemed to possess souls of their own, gifts that seemed to possess powers unimaginable.

"What are you?" I asked, forgetting completely that I doubted these visions, I wanted to know them, and I wanted to befriend them.

"You cannot know as wise as you are. You have come to seek, but cannot speak, what we are, you already know. We worship you for joining us now, we have a task that requires your strength, and we have waited a millennium for this day to come."

"You are our savior, oh wise and powerful, with all the powers we have conquered, the task we must accomplish is one of your expertise! Help us and we will help you with that which

weighs on your heart so dearly” The elf dressed in the darkest shade of green spoke, his voice enchanting me, lulling me to peace. I knew what they wanted of me and I knew what they would give me. They could secure what tied me to the earth, the only thing keeping me from staying in the Elven realm, was a girl with blonde hair and a beautiful face.

“How can you help me? No one can help me” I said to the elf, assuming he must be the leader of the group.

“What you speak are lies and you know it yourself. Help is something that lives in many shapes and forms, it is a vessel, and we will guide it to your heart. Help us now and we can help you always” he replied, taking the hands of his fellow Elves and forming a circle with me at the center.

I examined them more closely, they were chanting now. Chanting in their language and chanting with voices that shone love. They were about human size, they had humanoid features, and the only thing of noticeable difference was indeed their pointed ears. But still they moved like machines. Mechanical. And they exuberated this aura of complete power and control, I was dumbfounded.

“What do you ask of me? Tell me and I will comply!” I exclaimed. Their voices were luring me, they knew they had won my trust and won my devotion. The chanting had been beautiful, I wanted it to continue and I wanted it to stop. It was beautiful. I didn’t know what I wanted!

“You are the one, the one of the earth, the one who can deliver us the last of the powers. With this power we can forever more watch over you and guide you, protect you and worship you, we will bind you by an oath” replied the leader, his eyes beginning to shine and glow an unnatural color.

“What must I swear?” I asked, eager to fulfil.

“You must swear nothing, it us who must swear!”

And then the chanting picked up once again, louder than before and soon all their eyes were glowing like their leader.

“We swear to protect, the liberator of the ninth realm, he who shall award us with last and final guardian” the voice of the leader sounded out the loudest, the others did not speak my language they continued in what must have been elfish.

“We bind hereby the stars and promise their following order. Arlo of earth shall have what he desires, Arlo of Earth shall have what he seeks. Arlo of Earth will fulfil the prophecy and Arlo

of Earth shall be sung about in the halls of Indernak for centuries to come.” The lights of the domelike building flickered, the Elves seemed panicked, but their leader reassured them. “The pact is completed! Let the lights stand still!” the lights obeyed, they shone even brighter than they had before. The main Elf had just controlled the lights like his hand was a remote control. It was dope.

He walked towards me, his eyes dimming to human form again. “You have only limited time here Arlo. Waste no time. If you do not complete the task, the stars I have bound shall die and destruct, killing your people and destroying your planet” he said, his voice sounding urgent, pressing me onwards. “My bad, but no pressure.”

“Say what I must do, I will do anything to protect my people” I responded, nodding my head.

“Follow the corridor until you arrive in the gardens of our planet. There you will find the beast, you must kill it and rip its head off. It keeps from us the last guardian of the galaxy, the last protection to watch over you and your people.” I was confused, the Elves clearly possessed immense power, why couldn’t they kill this beast themselves?

“Why have you not killed it already?” I asked.

“It’s complicated homie. You must do this Arlo.” The leader had persuaded me pretty easily. In my current state of mind, I seemed quite impressionable. I saw his task as my destiny, saving the planet was what my life had always led me to.

I made my way, down the corridor, looking back once more at the elven creatures. They stole my breath away, they were like different particles of a girl I knew, a girl that stole my breath with the exact same pressure. Yes, I was comparing Emily to the aliens that were literal embodiments of a hallucination, but you shouldn’t be so shocked. I’ve been trying to tell you for the last 30/40 thousand words that I’m not right in the head. I guess thanks for the benefit of the doubt if you still didn’t believe it.

I arrived at a door, made of titanium or some other shiny metal and grabbed the handle and pushed down, surprised when the door slid apart into two different fragments, leaving behind a clear path to the outside. I took my first step, instantly terrified once I noticed the floor was only an apparition. But it didn’t matter, I could stand nevertheless. Whether I was floating or whether there was a hidden surface beneath the illusion, I happily walked on what felt like thin air.

I was painfully aware of the clock ticking away. I needed to complete the task and fulfil the wishes of the Elves before it was too late.

I started up a brisk run, the end of the pathway approaching nearer and nearer. I felt like I'd experienced this before, I felt like I knew where I was running to. I arrived at another door, but the door had no handle. Walls ran along on either side, and my hopes of jumping over were crushed by the jagged wires resting atop the walls. There was no button I could press on the door, no lever I could pull. I was stumped. But also aware that I was currently residing in a magical realm where anything was possible. So, I gave it a go.

"Open this door, I am on a mission for Indernak" I said. Nothing happened. I scratched my head. "Please?" I said questioningly. Courtesy seems to go quite far, even in a magical realm.

I smiled as the door slid open, revealing a vast garden, flowers as tall as trees and trees as tall as skyscrapers. The ground became fully solidified here, no illusion just plain soft soil. A breeze came and whipped me in the face. But it didn't hurt at all, the force was unconceivable, but the pain simply never came. Fruits that had no names, grains that had no family, all these things I could smell through my nose. The glorious smell of the ninth realm. It was like someone had jammed several sticks of incense up my nostrils.

And then I saw it, it was hard to miss. A human my size came running fast towards me, he was charging me with no weapon in hand, but I could tell from his look that he wanted to hurt the Elves. He was a human, it was indistinguishable, but no human I had ever seen had eyes filled with such pain and rage, suffering and torture. He wanted to harm, it was his only goal and I could not let that happen!

"Leave this planet, uh, beast! You have no purpose here!" I felt no fear as I charged at him too. The clash was going to be inevitable, one of us was bound to die, but it couldn't be me, it would have to be him. If I died so would my people, right? The beast just wanted to smash me up.

"Arlo, sit the hell down!" snarled the beast.

I ignored his futile attempt to calm me, the beast had no business talking to me. "I need to kill you, I'm sorry." I lied to him, I wasn't sorry, but maybe it would ease his anger and make it easier for me to kill him.

We collided like two particles accelerated at the speed of light, my fist landed in his face and his nose exploded with blood. The beast fell to the ground and he stayed down for a while. When he got up, he glared at me and spat blood, his eyes starting to glow like the elf leader, but the beast's eyes glowed red.

“Just try and touch me, beast,” I shouted at the enemy, “I have been sent by the almighty Elves. The oath has been bound and the stars are aligned!”

He looked at me with a frozen expression, speechless to what I had said, seemingly wandering if I was high. Then he punched me in the face and I was booted back to reality.

“What the hell is your problem you dickhead!” as I fell to the floor and was promptly kicked in the ribs.

“Do you seriously think you can just talk kak about everyone here and then punch me in the face?” asked the voice, not really giving me the option to reply, when he kicked me in the head and spat on my face. He didn’t kick me hard, but it sure as shit wasn’t soft. It served as an all too real reminder of the painful reality I actually lived in, and that I wasn’t the savior of humanity as I’d thought moments ago.

I wanted to say that the Elves had told me to kill him, that the Elves had said that they would guard us forever. But even while I lay there, small on the floor, blood streaming from my nose and mouth, I realized that I must have imagined everything. I must have been a lot higher, than I had originally thought.

“Are you going to answer me you fucking pisser?” asked the voice, spitting blood somewhere onto my body. I couldn’t answer, I physically couldn’t raise my head to answer, so the voice continued his retaliation.

“Fine buddy, if you wake up tomorrow, just remember the name Jessie, and that I’m the reason you feel like a broken ragdoll” said Jessie. I didn’t know Jessie, I didn’t know what he looked like but one thing I had managed to learn by plain and simple guessing was that Jessie was a pretty violent person. And maybe I’d provoked him. Either way, I had never been beaten up in my entire life, I didn’t even count Jessie kicking me in the head as being beaten up. But when one of Jessie’s friends joined in and I stopped feeling the pain, that experience I count as being beaten up.

I don’t know how long it lasted, and I don’t remember who stopped it. But somebody did, and somebody stepped in and fought for me. I heard various shouts as I was drifting in and out of consciousness, and once I was certain that I had been left alone, I mustered my reserve energy and started getting up.

I know it sounds dodgy, if I’d really been beaten up I would have required assistance or something to help me get up, right? Here I am saying that I lost a grasp of what pain feels like and

I still managed to get up? Shit, I know it sounds weird but I managed to do it all the same. I stood up and stayed up, it took me a while I won't deny that.

But once I was up I just remember more shouting as I blacked out once more and fell into somebody's arms.

## Chapter 13: Medical Explanations

The first thing I saw when I awoke from my deep sleep, was white, white and more bloody white. The room was white, I'm not trying to sound poetic. There was just white, literally everywhere.

But that's way too cliché to start a chapter, and so just for the purpose of being original, I'll say that the first thing I saw, was a man dressed in white, scribbling notes onto his clipboard. He had a wrinkled face, the kind of glasses that said he didn't have time for style or fashion, and he was looking at me with a negative look; the kind that said something was terribly wrong.

Once he realized that I'd opened my eyes, he smiled gingerly and called for a nurse while still jotting things down on his clipboard.

"Who are you?" I asked, noticing how raw my voice sounded.

"I'm Dr. Patel. You've had a bit of an accident I believe" said the man, looking up from his clipboard and approaching where I lay. He shone a flashlight in my eyes for a few seconds, taking note of how my pupils responded before heading towards the door. "The nurse will be here in a moment to look after you, just sit tight."

I was on a bed, I noticed it now. Not a fluffy comfortable bed, but rather the kind of bed you'd find in a hospital. Which would make sense since the whole room was giving me those kind of hospital vibes. I smelled bleach in the air, the whiteness of it all was sterile and Dr. Patel had the weathered look of a man who'd worked in a hospital for most of his life.

I waited in silence, trying to make sense of the last memories that came to me. I was very confused, that much was certain. I didn't know how I'd gotten here, I didn't know where *here* was even though I suspected it was a hospital, and above all my head felt like it was balancing a house on it. The nurse walked through the doorway and sat down on a chair beside me.

"Hi there Mr. Schreiber. I'm Nurse van der Skreet. The Doctor is very busy tonight as you can imagine, but I'm happy to answer any questions you may have. How are you feeling after your accident?" She had a gentle face, not quite motherly but friendly and caring nonetheless.

"If you consider being beaten up by two guys as an *accident*, then sure, let's call it that," I said, starting to remember flashes of the last moments before I'd passed out.

"The boy that dropped you off didn't say anything about being beaten up," said the nurse, "Although that would more than explain your given injuries. Falling out of a tree can only do so much."

Fallen out of a tree? That must have been the weakest excuse for looking black and blue I'd ever heard, in fact I probably could have come up with something better while unconscious.

"Who dropped me off Nurse? I'm in hospital, right?" I asked. The nurse smiled and nodded her head to comfort me in my state of confusion. Not that I myself was exactly sure what I'd been through. Most of what I remembered were barely edges of various pictures, but nothing was chronological, and nothing really made sense. Actually I didn't even know what had happened and what had not.

"It's understandable that you're feeling a little delirious. The pain killers will do that for an hour or two.

"The boy said his name was Evan. About your height, more muscular of build. I'd say he was about 16 or so. He dropped you off at 12:30, gave us the number of your host parents and told us to call them. And yes, you're in the trauma room of Vincent Palotti Hospital, but we obviously can't release you with an injury like that till the morning," said the nurse, glancing down at her clipboard. "You have very good friends" she added, "Not everyone would have brought you here in the dead of night."

"What time is it now?" I asked.

"It's 2:30 now. We've been hoping you'd wake up for quite some time" she answered. Her eyes moved downwards as she looked at her clipboard again.

"Anyways, given your injuries I suggest you rest the remaining weekend, preferably sitting down or in bed. Make sure to keep your blood pressure low, some of your wounds are a bit dodgy, though you didn't need stitches they might start bleeding if you start getting too active. Puncture wounds to the head are always nasty to deal with." She smiled reassuringly before continuing again.

"Which brings me to the next matter of business which we should discuss before you continue sleeping. So, because you're over the age of 16, I don't need to share any of this with your guardians. In your blood we found a rather large amount of the compound DMT, amongst other substances such as a high alcohol level and quite a bit of THC. But the alcohol and the marijuana aren't really surprising in someone your age. Given that you're not too dehydrated I'm guessing you can handle yourself relatively well, I seriously doubt that your beating had anything to do with either of those. But the amount of DMT, was definitely a recreational dose, I just don't

really understand why you'd smoke DMT while already under the influence of other substance." Said the nurse, her tone questioning.

I didn't understand. I knew THC was the active ingredient in weed, that's what got you high, alcohol was kind of self-explanatory and I knew I'd been pretty damn stoned and a little tipsy just hours before, but what on earth was DMT?

"What is DMT?" I asked, hoping the nurse would take me seriously. She nodded her head again and looked sort of grim.

"I suspected as much. But it's certainly the strangest case of intoxicated emergency room patients I've ever seen. The doctor actually tested your blood twice because it didn't make any sense. DMT is a unique compound that is found in all organisms on the planet, including humans. At certain times in our lives, our bodies will produce it, why and when we don't know for certain.

"In the 1950's a Hungarian chemist was the first to realize DMT's psychedelic properties when he injected it in himself and experienced the first synthesized DMT trip. Based on his discovery he went to the United States to further his research. DMT is the most potent hallucinogen and psychedelic substance known to man. Most of what's known about the effects, short term or long term is mainly hypothesized. There aren't a lot of people in the world that have a government issued license to work with most psychedelics, so what the medical community goes by is mostly guessing work with a bit of personal subjective experiences thrown in.

"You probably saw and experienced things that you can't really explain. If you want to talk about it, I can recommend a very good psychologist who deals with unplanned psychedelic experiences."

I let the information register. It seemed crazy, to be perfectly honest, this nurse was honestly having me believe that I had taken the most potent hallucinogen known to man? Literally, I was quoting her on that.

"How exactly would I have taken the DMT? I don't remember much but I definitely didn't inject anything!" I brushed over the nurses offer for a psychologist, and even though it was an unconscious decision, I felt somewhat calm about the whole thing, like the experience made perfect sense even though it didn't.

"One can smoke it, can't one?" I asked the nurse, knowing the answer before she had even replied.

“You most certainly can. Whenever you smoked that joint tonight, you also smoked DMT. Why anyone would lace marijuana with DMT, I have absolutely no idea. Here in Cape Town the weed is sometimes laced with tic, which is the South African form of crystal meth, but not once have I seen a case where somebody smoked marijuana laced with DMT. Did you share the joint with anyone else?” asked the nurse.

I gave a solemn chuckle and nodded my head. “Do I really look like a person who would smoke a joint by themselves?” She gave a weak smile and bade me to continue.

“I smoked the joint with four people. I remember that clearly enough. I also remember that they were surprised by how hard the weed was hitting me. Like I was straight up seeing and hearing stuff before I blacked out completely.”

Part of me felt almost as disgusted as I did betrayed. I had left behind an Arlo that was innocent and pure, an Arlo that hadn’t even known what DMT was. But on the other side, I also knew that undoubtedly, I had been changed by whatever it was that I had experienced. I had seen things, learnt things that I could only learn from being blasted into another dimension. Now it was up to me to retain those lessons.

“How come my friends weren’t affected by the DMT?” I asked.

The Nurse stayed quiet as her head stooped a little lower, obviously deep in thought. “I guess it’s possible, even if it’s like 5% probable, that the DMT could have fallen through the marijuana buds and gotten stuck in one particular part of the joint. It would then require one person to smoke just the right amount to completely vaporize the DMT and inhale all of it, leaving none for the rest of the smokers. But mathematically, before you came in here, I would have said it was impossible.

“So, I guess you could say that you’re hands down the unluckiest patient I’ve ever had in the emergency room. And I know it’s not a competition, but at least won this one” said the Nurse, breaking out a toothy grin. I appreciated her efforts, but still rolled my eyes a little to indicate that the humor wasn’t helping.

I blinked my eyes and tried to think clearly. Not that my thoughts were clouded, on the contrary they felt very clean, pristine, as though my mind had been washed gently with strawberry scented soap. But it didn’t change how surreal this all sounded, it just seemed like a quick transition from drinking and smoking for the first time three weeks ago, to now having tried the most potent hallucinogen known to man.

"This isn't a joke, is it? The guy who dropped me off didn't ask you to make this up?" I asked, semi hoping that the nurse would say yes.

She shook her head. "I'm afraid not Arlo. But you should be happy that you accidentally took something like DMT. The night could have gone a whole lot worse if you had taken heroin or tic."

"You said that you don't have to tell my guardians s that I had DMT in my blood sample, right?" I asked, not even trying to hide the fear in my voice. I needed a confirmation. If Theresa would pick me up, and if the nurse would tell Theresa that I had taken DMT, then my parents would find out. If Stephan came to pick me up, and if the nurse would tell Stephan that I had taken DMT, then my parents would find out. If my grandmother came to pick me up... Oh, who am I kidding? Whomever the nurse would tell, my parents would find out one way or another. My only path to salvation was if no one told anybody nothing. Nothing.

"Short answer. No, I don't have to tell them. Long answer. I wish I could tell them, Arlo. I want you to know that at sixteen years old you don't need to be drinking and smoking so much, just because your friends are doing it. Seriously, your liver is not going to be happy about it in forty years, take it from someone who treats patients with alcoholism most of the week."

She got up and approached the sink in the corner of the room. She poured the contents of a sachet into a plastic cup before filling it up with water and handing it to me.

"Drink this. You're still a bit pale in the face. Have some electrolytes before you lie down. If you're feeling well enough when you wake up in the morning, your guardians can sign you out so you can recover at home. The doctor recommended that you stay the weekend, but hospitals are a little depressing and your host mother seemed pretty eager to get you home."

I took the cup and poured its contents slowly into my mouth. I only then realized just how parched my throat was, but I wasn't surprised given by how long we'd been talking.

"Well thanks for taking the time to explain all of this to me, Ms. Van der Skreet. It's made me a little less confused for sure, even though I still wish I could remember more."

"Maybe it'll come back with time. I'm hoping for you. Any other questions?" She smiled as she took the cup from me and jotted down something on her clipboard.

I shook my head and thanked her again for taking the time to speak with me. I watched her leave through the doorway before closing the door behind her, and when I was alone again I

suddenly felt very tired and ready to sleep. So I turned onto my side and closed my eyes, almost instantly falling into a deep sleep.

---

When I woke up again, the hospital was full of life. My room was unchanged, but from outside the door I could hear the busy bustling of a medical station. There were things happening out there.

I looked at the clock on the wall and saw that it was already 08:30. I mean, already was maybe not the best word, and five hours sleep were nowhere near enough to feel strong after a puncture wound to the head, but the earlier I was awake, the earlier I would hopefully be home. I took my phone which I found in my pants pocket and sent Theresa a message that I was awake and alive and would greatly appreciate to be picked up as soon as possible. She responded within the minute of my message having been delivered that she was on her way.

I only realized then that I was in my boxers. And that was weird. Or it wasn't weird? Was there something weird about having your clothes taken off while unconscious? Hmm, would this have happened in Germany?

I pushed the button beside my bed to notify the nurse that I had woken up. I wanted to let her know that my host mother was on her way, as well as thank her again for speaking with me the night before. I presumed that not every patient got a personal nurse at 02:30 in the morning, but then again, most patients also weren't committed to the hospital for blacking out on DMT.

After waiting for a minute or two, the door opened, and I was surprised to see the doctor from the night before. I had assumed his shift would be over by now, regardless, there he stood with his clipboard smiling.

"Morning Mr. Schreiber how are you feeling this morning?" he asked.

"I mean I'm ridiculously tired, but my headache has gotten a little better and I can probably recover much better at home," I responded. He frowned as I said that.

"The nurse did explain everything to you, right? Head injuries are no joke, if you can you should stay the weekend just for observation. And maybe a visit to the psychologist for the other thing with you blood..." he trailed off, a stern expression taking hold to let me know that he really didn't approve.

“She explained everything really well. I’m so thankful that she spent so much time explaining everything, but I really can recover better at home I think. I’m just not a big hospital fan. My host mother is on her way here already,” I responded smiling sheepishly, deciding to simply ignore the offer of a psychologist yet again.

“Hmm. Very well, if your host mother signs you out, I can’t really change anything. But I’ll write you up a script for some painkillers and some immune boosters. Look after yourself Mr. Schreiber.” Dr. Patel started for the door while jotting something down on his clipboard in an agitated manner. I called after him one last time before he left.

“Please thank the nurse for me. I think I would have needed... help, if she hadn’t had that chat with me.” I again refrained from using the words therapy or psychologist, but the doctor understood as he nodded and disappeared.

I waited about half an hour before a different nurse came by to come and collect me. She wasn’t as gentle as Ms. Van der Skreet but she meant well. I staggered a little as I struggled to steady myself, surprised by how weak my body was. I mean I was always weak, the most sport I did was walking from the fridge to the dinner table, but still, this was new level of weak even for me.

“It’s the blood loss. Just take it slow. I’ll wait for you outside while you’re changing” said the nurse, heading to the door and walking outside.

She nodded as he saw me exiting and waved me along down the corridor of rooms. “You already look better” was all she commented as she pushed open the door and held it open for me. I smiled weakly and nodded my head, wincing ever so slightly at the distant pain coming from the ‘puncture’ in my head.

“Arlo!” Theresa shouted across the waiting room, gently wrapping her arms around me with that sort of caring motherly hug. I stood there awkwardly, waiting to be released before saying anything other than a feeble ‘hi’.

“What have you done to yourself?” asked Theresa crossly, before quickly adding, “I’ve been worried sick since the hospital called! Your parents are going to kill me!” she said.

“Trust me they won’t, I’ll explain everything to them. The only person they can really be mad at, is me” I said.

“And you’ll explain it to me too! You hardly fell out of a tree, did you?” she asked, directing her question at the nurse.

"I'm not actually allowed to tell you what he discussed with the doctor or the nurses. I'm just supposed to reiterate that the doctor has recommended for Mr. Schreiber to stay for observation over the weekend, and that you are releasing him against this recommendation. You can pick up your prescription at the pharmacy by the entrance. If he starts bleeding again, he needs to be admitted immediately. Use Ice to stem the bleeding."

"I see" was all Theresa said her eyes focused on me. She signed the release form and shook the nurse's hand, as did I. Then the nurse turned around and headed back down the corridor.

I smiled again and gave her an almost apologetic look. "Can I maybe tell you after we've gotten home? I'm pretty exhausted if I'm honest" I said. I felt bad even asking, Theresa had driven forty minutes to the hospital to pick up her exchange student who had managed to get himself a puncture wound in the head. But I wasn't being selfish, it was more like if I didn't lie down soon, I would probably pass out again. And then I wouldn't be going anywhere.

"Of course," was all she said, before interlocking her arm with mine and steadyng as we walked to the car park. "You kids these days. Going to parties and coming back black and blue. Falling out of trees and ending up in the hospital!" Her tone was that typical motherly tone. You know the one that's filled with a lecturing wisdom, but sounds more caring than it does sound reprimanding? Yeah that one. The "I'm trying to bring you up as a sophisticated member of society" tone, the one you'll have ringing out in your head before you think about doing something your mother wouldn't approve of. It was kind of wonderful, beautiful. It showed care.

Theresa turned on the car and reversed out of the parking place. The radio turned on and was switched to a soothing station. I don't know what station it was, I don't know what they were playing, but it made me feel better.

"Black and blue, black and blue..." continued Theresa, muttering to herself.

"Falling out of a tree..." her mumbling continued as my head slumped slowly against the window, embracing the soothing darkness of a quick nap for the road home.

"Arlo, one thing is absolutely sure. You may have fallen out of a tree and you may be black and blue. But I am sure as hell happy, that it wasn't drugs that landed you in the hospital" said Theresa, sounding relieved.

I didn't say anything back, not that I would have had a good response to begin with. But in the same way that Theresa was absolutely sure, so was I. That was probably the most hilarious thing I had ever heard, even if I felt bad for finding it funny. Sometimes life just be that way.

## Chapter 14: This is going to sound a little unbelievable

For the second time in 24 hours, I woke up with confusion and grogginess plastered all over my beaten and abused head. Everything ached as I slowly forced my eyes open. The duvet lay heavy on top of my body, like a weight on my shoulder, but soothing to an extent, so soothing in fact that I was against the idea of moving at all, considering movement to be pretty much, overrated.

The smell of bacon, crispy bacon the kind that's perfect for consumption, was filling my nostrils and persuading me to move my limbs. But not even bacon, I repeat, not even bacon could get me to move. That's how shitty, lazy and tired I felt. Like a stationary brick, satisfied with the thought of doing nothing at all for the rest of my life. Then the door quietly opened.

"Are you awake, Arlo?" asked the voice, invisible to my, what I had now noticed, very limited line of sight. I was looking up at the ceiling, the white and simple ceiling, oddly fascinated by its uninteresting features. Then again, looking at anything else would have involved moving even just an inch.

Seconds passed as I pondered whether I should reply or not. I mean, I was awake, obviously, but as easy as it was to reply yes, it was easier still to say nothing and close my eyes. And I was tempted to do it, just for a few moments of doing absolutely nothing.

But I accepted the reality, the inevitable, I'd have to move eventually, it was never really an actual option to never move again. And I wasn't an asshole. That's why I replied, I think above all, that's why I decided to move. I wasn't an asshole, and there was bacon.

"I'm awake," I said, following up with a yawn and slowly shifting my body upwards. I sat up against, the cool back board of my bed and glanced towards my visitor. The relatively short hair, the short-ish body. I recognized Theresa instantly wearing that 'I'll take care of you' look far too well. It was wholesome seeing her there, holding a fresh cup of tea that lightly steamed.

"How are you feeling this afternoon?" she asked, putting the tea on my desk and sitting down on the chair.

"Groggy. Really groggy. And my head is definitely still spinning a little, but I guess that's from the lack of sleep as well." I grinned feebly, daring myself to take my hands from out beneath the covers and claim my tea. The warmth from the cup quickly spread from my finger tips to my stomach as the warm elixir rushed along my throat and made me feel warm and cuddly inside.

Theresa just had this way about her, she made everything seem OK. She reminded me so much of my own mother that it was weird sometimes.

“I think it’s more lack of blood than lack of sleep, Arlo. It’s 14:30 now, you’re hardly sleep deprived!” she said, laughing weakly. She was clearly worried about me, her eyes revealed her true emotions, and it made me feel so safe and perfect that suddenly my headache only seemed half as bad as it really was. It was the ultimate warmth, a blanket of unconditional care.

“I don’t think I’ve ever slept longer than 10 hours! I guess I have the bacon to thank though for not sleeping any longer!” Theresa smiled as she picked up on my hint and started to get up.

“Two full plates of bacon are in the making. I told Stephan that by the second batch you’d be awake. No 16-year-old boy can resist the beautiful smell of bacon,” she headed to the door and stopped just short, “Shall I bring you some upstairs?”

I nodded gratefully as my mouth started salivating. There were many ways to a woman’s heart, and many ways to a man’s heart. The quickest way of all these ways combined, was surely without a doubt, offering a man some bacon, and making sure there was an excessive amount of it.

As I waited for Theresa to return with the greatest of all gifts, I stretched my hand towards my desk to retrieve my phone which was lying there charging. I didn’t really know, how and when it had gotten there, from the moment Theresa and I had left the hospital I seemed to have been asleep. But somehow yet I had made it to bed, and stranger yet I seemed to have been capable enough to make sure my phone would charge overnight. I was a strange kid, no kidding.

I unlocked my phone and felt a small pang of sadness. Not, one, notification. I guess I’d kind of expected at least one person to check in on me if I was still alive or something. Maybe I hadn’t been so bad when I’d left the party, or maybe they all knew I was fine. I don’t know, but I was probably overthinking it.

But it still hurt, even if I was imagining it, that no one actually cared. It was a weird feeling, a stark contrast to the past few weeks where I’d been overwhelmed by how many people cared. I tried to stop thinking about it as Theresa reentered the room with a plate full of bacon. She was literally holding a plate full of bacon. My eyes began to glow, I forgot momentarily about my social demise as the smell overtook me and made me something else. I was to devour this bacon, that’s all that was important in this life. The devouring of bacon. Seemed like a plan.

Theresa sat down on the chair again and handed me the plate. “There’s a slice of toast buried underneath the bacon somewhere on the plate, I thought I’d make it fun and you have to look for it.” I smiled, Theresa was just doing all the right things, making me great food, making the mother equivalent of dad jokes. I just felt perfectly looked after. I couldn’t be anywhere better in that moment in time.

“So why don’t you tell me what happened last night? And please don’t tell me you actually fell out of a tree, I was hoping you weren’t that stupid” said Theresa teasingly, her face expression becoming sterner. But she deserved an explanation considering how much she’d looked after me in the last 12 hours alone.

I nodded my head whilst stuffing a piece of bacon elegantly down my throat. I had thought about the story I would tell, this morning, perfecting it once more just as Theresa had left. It wasn’t a long story, it didn’t need to be. It just needed to be sufficient, even make me the hero and victim if I could, and that’s exactly what I thought about as I took a bit longer than usual to swallow my mouthful of bacon. I looked at Theresa, right in the eyes. What I was about to say, wasn’t a lie, what I was about to conjure up wasn’t a deceit, the fact of the matter was I had convinced myself enough that I myself believed in the story as much as anyone would. And it hadn’t been hard given that I still had no idea what had really happened.

“I’m going to start off from the first day of school, just for context I guess. I met a girl, Evan’s sister, Emily, and although I’m not sure what I feel for her, and although I’m not sure why I feel it, I feel very strongly for her and I kind of think she’s the most beautiful girl on the planet.” My voice was hesitant as I watched for a reaction, any kind of reaction from Theresa’s behalf. Her face was blank, so I continued.

“I’ve been trying to show her that I feel quite strongly for her, over the last couple of weeks that is, but, well, it’s kind of difficult I guess and bla bla this and bla bla that. I’m sure you understand.” Theresa nodded her head. “And so, well the main thing is that I feel very strongly for her, and I think she’s pretty damn close to perfect and if I wasn’t such an idiot I would probably tell her all this myself. But, I am an idiot.

“And at the party last night, two guys showed up who I’d never met before. Jessie and Clive, I think. I remember being introduced to them briefly, but that about it. Jessie and Clive had been drinking, like it was super obvious that they were relatively drunk. Which I’m guessing is why they started causing trouble.

"They were going around the house breaking bottles and just messing with Evan's stuff. A couple of people asked them to leave, but when someone's that drunk they're not going to leave if you ask them nicely. So no one actually did anything about it, neither did I to be honest. But then Emily did. She confronted them and told them to get out of her house.

"Again, they were drunk as all hell and kind of got a kick out of a 16-year-old girl telling them what to do. So they started pushing her around and calling her pretty horrible things, and I guess you could say I reached my breaking point. I snapped. And though I've never been in a fight before, I went over to them and started shouting at them, telling them to pick on somebody their own size. At first, they laughed and called me this, and called me that, but I think they knew that I meant business when I punched Jessie in the face and told them both to piss off and get out. Except, I thought that would work, I've seen a lot of movies, but I didn't really see them just getting madder about it and beating me up. Which they then did, majorly, like they actually beat me unconscious. Definitely not something I'd like to repeat" I finished my story and kept my eyes fixated on Theresa's blank face expression. It was impressive that she showed only indifference as she breathed through her nose and blinked at an uneven beat. She seemed to be deciding whether she believed me or not.

When she spoke, she did so very calmly. "So who stopped the beating? Or rather, who brought you to the hospital I guess?"

"I think Evan stepped in and fought for me. At least that's what it seems like because at some point I just remember it stopping. And well, then I woke up in the hospital." I said, relatively sure that it was in fact Evan who had saved me. It was the only thing that made sense.

"And then he just left you at the hospital?" asked Theresa.

"Yeah." I muttered through gritted teeth, remembering waking up alone in a strange place and feeling confused that no one was there. "Yeah, he just left me there. I guess he thought I was in good hands." He had probably saved me, and he had brought me to the hospital, but Evan had also left me in a strange place engulfed in confusion.

Theresa nodded understandingly, glancing at my plate of bacon which was now three quarters empty. She picked it up and headed to the door, seemingly done with her round of questioning.

"I'm going to get you some more bacon, and when you've finished eating I'm going to drive you to your grandmother's, so you can rest there tonight. She called earlier and said she'd love to see you."

My grandmother. Maud Schreiber, I hadn't seen her in at least a year and as the thought finally dawned on me, it turned out I hadn't even seen her since arriving in Cape Town! I smiled at the thought of seeing her. She was an incredible woman. Crazy and funny, caring and loving, a cocktail of Maud was exactly what I needed to make my recovery.

Theresa turned to leave as I nodded my head. She hesitated. "Whoever that girl is Arlo, she better be pretty damn special. I don't know if everyone can understand it, but I think I do. We all have that person we'd jump off a cliff for. That one person that brings light to every darkness." I hadn't thought about it in that way before. I hadn't even thought about what exactly Emily meant to me. She *was* special, she *was* amazing, maybe it was time for me to accept that truth, and maybe it was time that I accepted what was, the explicit reality of the Emily situation.

## Chapter 15: Noordhoek Manor, The sin city of Cape Town... Fine, not really

My grandmother Maud lives by herself in a retirement village on the outskirts of Cape Town, in Noordhoek manor. Her house is a simple single-story building, spacious and open with plenty of lighting, but its simplicity ends outside in the garden which is one of its many gems, complete with a wild and exotic plant assortment.

When I was younger we would often stay at Maud's house when we were visiting from Ireland. We would spend half the trip at the house in Noordhoek, and half the trip at my other grandmother's house in central Cape Town. For a five or six-year-old with a blooming imagination, the house in Noordhoek was perhaps the closest thing to the Garden of Eden. Or something like that in any case. When you gave me a walking stick, which Maud and my late grandfather Kurt had a plenty of, and left me in the garden to my own devices, I would be transported to any number of places, allowing my mind to wander about and explore the full depth of my imagination. It was a kind of bliss that shaped my childhood in so many ways and leaves me today with happy memories.

Now, let me tell you what kind of woman my grandmother is. I mean, she's just not normal even though it would be a lot easier to explain if she had any shred of normalcy. You see, Maud Schreiber is the kind of woman who goes paragliding in Mexico at the age of 80, she's the kind of woman that wants to travel to Mongolia to go hiking at the age of 85, later next year (2015). She's crazy, I mean to label it otherwise would be a crime. But she is, thank God, the healthy kind of crazy, and because she's so intent on continuing with her crazy antics, she'll probably continue living alone and assisting herself for quite some time. And with her crazy, comes a whole lot of kind too. The type of kindness which comes in handy when you've been beaten black and blue and need a sweet loving grandmother to stitch you back up good.

The drive to Noordhoek took me and Theresa on a scenic route, along the Atlantic Ocean on a road called Chapmans Peak. Watching the seagulls whizz by and feeling the salty air cascading through my hair made me feel full of life and energetic. It was like somebody had pushed my reset button and the process had already started. I wasn't rest yet, but I was definitely feeling the process of renewal.

We drove through the gates of the entrance to Noordhoek Manor and greeted the guards as we drove to Maud's house. Everything was quiet, which made a lot of sense given that it was four o'clock on a Saturday afternoon and we were in a retirement village. The car was a lone sound

accompanied only by the gravel crunching beneath our tires as we drove just under the village's speed limit of 15 km/h. The house approached as we went deeper into the heart of the village leaving behind the open nature as we entered elderly South African suburbia. My grandmother's house lay at the very top of the hill on which the village was built on, towering over the other houses like a king in his castle.

We pulled into the driveway of Paul Mall lane and got out of the car. The air was fresh, and I breathed in slowly as the renewal continued. I was flooded with a sense of happiness and well being as I looked at the house that lay before me. So many beautiful memories lived within these walls.

The door to the house opened as me and Theresa approached it. "Arlo, what on earth have you done to yourself? You look worse than a bruised apple on its deathbed!" Maud Schreiber rushed forwards and smothered me with a ginormous hug. She held on tight for a good few seconds, squeezing me with an unnatural strength before turning towards Theresa.

"You must be Theresa Martin! Arlo's parents have told me so much about you, I hope you haven't been overfeeding him. He used to be so fat when he was small!" My grandmother shook Theresa's hand, deliberately trying to be articulate as she was conscious of her barely noticeable Austrian accent.

"He eats about twice as much as Ryan and I'm still pretty sure he's *lost* a kilo since arriving in Cape Town! If I had such a fast metabolism I'd probably just stop doing anything and sit around reading all day long." Theresa smiled. And that's when I realized how lucky I was. I was being passed from one pair of good hands to the next, as if I had a whole gang of guardian angels just waiting to have my back. It felt great.

"Bah, a kilo isn't enough." My grandmother paused as she gestured to my stomach, keeping a face of utmost sincerity. Then she cracked a smile and gently slapped me where my fat should be. "I'm kidding of course, I also wish I had your metabolism!" Theresa laughed and so did I.

My grandmother and Theresa continued to chit chat, making me feel a little awkward as the grogginess from before began to catch up with me. I laughed weakly at their jokes and nodded when they mentioned me but was constantly attracted to the bed in the guest room which surely had my name on it. I wanted to sleep, I was about to fall asleep. In fact the fresh mountain breeze was the only thing keeping my eyes ajar. So, luckily my grandmother came to my rescue before I'd figure out a way to politely interrupt their small talk. She swooned.

"Theresa why don't you come inside for a cup of tea, I just put the kettle on as you pulled in. Arlo looks like he's about to pass out, I think it's best if he lies down and catches up on some lost sleep," said Maud, smiling understandingly as if she knew how much I'd been through. Then again, maybe I wasn't giving her the credit she deserved, the woman had been a tour guide for twenty something odd years, travelling to some of the roughest edges of the world. Maybe she did know, maybe along all those adventures picking up experiences and becoming the person she was today, my grandmother had smoked the most potent hallucinogen known to man, and maybe while she was high on that particular hallucinogen, she had gotten into a fight and been beaten to shit. Anything was possible I guess.

We walked as a trio through the entrance of the house and took off our shoes on the carpet in the doorway. It was a German house custom, which like most German house customs did actually have a method behind the madness and as logic suggests, the floors stayed a lot cleaner if everyone just took off their shoes in the doorway. No one ever questioned Maud's request, I think everyone knew that making it easier for an 84-year-old to clean her house, was kind of a good thing to do, and an easy way of doing your good deed for the day.

I said goodbye to Theresa and thanked her for everything she'd done since the night before, and started to the left of the hallway where I knew the guest bedroom was. Maud nodded and smiled as I walked.

"You know where to go. It's the first time you get the double bed, isn't it?" she asked.

"Yeah. Mom and Dad usually take it when they're here. It'll be a nice change from the Sofa."

Maud laughed. "Go sleep and whenever you wake up I'll bring you something warm to drink. Try to sleep as much as you can, sleeping is probably the best you can do." Theresa waved one last time to me and went off with Maud to the kitchen for her tea.

I went in the opposite direction, arriving at the guest bedroom. I was immediately filled with nostalgia upon waltzing in. Everything in the room was exactly the same, everything in the room seemed to be untouched since the last time I'd been here, two whole years ago. The duvet was the same, the smell lingering in the air, was the same. Flashes of past memories of the room whizzed by in my mind and I started spinning a little. I really did need to lie down.

I stripped down to my boxers and crawled beneath the covers, leaving the window open as the fresh air still fueled me, helping me to keep the dizziness and grogginess at a manageable

minimum. I turned the cushion upside down, something I did every time it got too hot. It was one of those unsolvable tics that busied me in those final moments before falling asleep, how to get the right temperature cushion, how to make sure to achieve the ultimate level of comfort. I didn't think it was even possible, there was always something I was doing wrong. One part of my head would be touching the warm part, one part of my head would be half off the cushion, there was always something amounting to displeasure. But then again, I guess that's why they call it a tic!

And then I was surprised. Not even my usual tic could keep me awake for much longer. Everything seemed suddenly flawlessly comfortable and so I readied myself for Nix to come and wrap her cold, determining arms around me. She would turn my world into darkness and make me dream, she would continue my renewal with her sweet and unforgiving touch. And while I thought of Nix, she was already with me, pulling me to the corner in the darkness of her realm.

I fell asleep.

## Chapter 16: What makes an idiotic hero

The moment I woke up was the moment Maud walked in, a cup of steaming tea in the one hand and her cellphone in the other. She sat down on the edge of the bed, placing the cup down on the bedside table. A look of confusion was plastered across my face as my eyes darted from her to the cup, trying to find a connection between the two. Where was I?

“Is everything OK? You look a little out of it if I may say so,” asked Maud, a look of concern taking refuge on her face. I blinked once and blinked again. I had been beaten? Like beat up? But, I was just in Berlin, with Isaiah and now...?

I glanced away from Maud’s caring eyes, finding myself looking at the plants by the window. It had all been a dream. A way too vivid dream, but still just a dream. I had briefly been a different person, a person I’d been in Berlin, a person hadn’t been the most popular, or rather a person who didn’t put any worth on being a person who is popular. I had been that person a mere two months ago and suddenly I was realizing how quickly the time had gone by. I wondered what friend Isaiah was doing, I wondered if he was still playing Minecraft, hoping that one of these days I would go online and build a house with him like in the old days. I wondered if he had changed as much as I had, I wondered how I had changed so much.

I looked back at Maud who was still looking at me, her expression having changed from concerned to puzzled. “I just had a really weird dream, or not weird, just really vivid. I woke up and thought I was in Berlin, and then I wasn’t so now I’m just a little disorientated.” I said, smiling reassuringly. My grandmother laughed.

“Have you been stealing from my whiskey cabinet again? Classic Arlo!” she said, ruffling my hair. “You little alcoholic!”

I laughed weakly with her, imagining the scene of me tippy toeing around the house and stealing a bottle of whatever Whiskey she currently had in stock. If only she knew how much I’d been drinking in the past few weeks, I don’t think she’d have been impressed. In fact I think that whiskey cabinet would have been under lock and key.

Whereas my dad would rather have me smoking marijuana than ever touching a drop of alcohol, my grandmother was quite a different role model, allowing my brother and me to always have a ‘sip’ of whatever she was drinking. That didn’t mean she wanted me downing a bottle of Amarula. Oops. Or drinking a shit ton of beer. Oops.

I picked up my cup of tea and slurped at it carefully, although I suspected the chances of it scalding my tongue would be rather slight if anything at all. Maud could make a pristine cup of tea, that much was certain, though how she got the temperature so right was something beyond me completely.

“The tea is as perfect as always Maudi,” I said to her, calling her by her family nickname, pronounced like ‘Maud-ee’.

Maud had always taught me that the value of complimenting someone on their skills, only remained special if one did so only in the right moments. Luckily for me, Maud had always said that my timing was perfect, and that I managed not to over compliment people which was a charismatic and charming trait. What Maud had failed to teach me was how to compliment a girl in the right way. I mean let’s face it, that hadn’t been going swimmingly so far.

“If I couldn’t make tea, what kind of grandmother would I be?” We both started laughing, simply enjoying the moment as I continued to drink my tea, noticing how much better I was feeling in contrast to earlier on. Leaving the window open had obviously been the move to make, but it could also be that having my loving grandmother watching over me was hitting the spot just right.

“Do you know what time it is?” I asked.

“I think it’s about 21:30, Theresa left at about 18:00 or so, she says that she hopes you’ll feel better and can’t wait to see you tomorrow again,” Maud paused, the same puzzled expression from before finding its way into the wrinkles of her skin. “And then she also told me to tell you, not to go around punching people in the face... I take it that’s why you’re looking like you’ve been hit by a bus?” asked Maud.

I sighed a little, regretting that I had to lie to my grandmother. It was still a white lie, white lies were invented for scenarios like this after all, but I guess I’d just wished that I might learn more about what had actually happened so I didn’t have to make everything up.

I smiled sheepishly and gave Maud a tired look. “Do you want the short or the long story? They both have the same ending.”

Maud rolled her eyes and smiled at me. “You and your father, I swear, spitting images of each other. You both think you’re hilarious, and you’re both melodramatic when it comes to telling a story. I’m 84 years old, I don’t have all day! Just give me the shortest possible version of the story, *please*.”

I smiled. Maud Schreiber was the perfect grandmother. Others may have pestered me for the full story, but Maud wasn't like the others. The bare details would be enough.

"The prologue to the story: I'm a bit of an idiot. But I'm also a hero." I paused to breathe and slurp the rest of my tea up. Maud waited for a further explanation.

"I'm an idiot because I went and picked a fight with two guys who were a little on the violent side even before I'd punched the one in the face. I'm a hero because I stopped them from pushing around a girl I know. Had I known that they would beat me up, I would probably do it all over again. Because I'm a hero." I finished my story and placed the empty tea cup back on the bedside table where it stood rather sullen, all too suddenly having lost its purpose.

Maud seemed to be lost in thought, unlike Theresa not analyzing the truth behind the story, but rather seeming to search for advice. She wheezed a little as she breathed, something she only did when she was getting tired.

"Can I tell you something, Arlo, that you may not want to hear?" asked Maud, her look becoming sympathetic.

I nodded my head and smiled to reassure her, I was hardly going to get mad at my own grandmother, especially while she was taking care of me and offering me advice which would presumably change my life. Well, that being said, I assumed and hoped it was advice, I really didn't want it to be anything else, advice was pretty much the only thing I could stomach right about now.

"It's really stupid to spread violence. There's usually another option when the first one you think of is 'punching someone in the face'. If you do punch them, that brings bad karma and bad karma is just shit for everyone," my grandmother paused and stopped herself. "Excuse my language, but I think you're old enough for some raw truth. Bad karma is shit. That's just how it is."

I opened my mouth to respond, but my grandmother interjected, making her final point sweet and short. "You are an idiot, that's for sure, but we always knew that didn't we" said Maud, cracking a smile and winking at me, giving me a strange tingling feeling that if it had been her in that same situation last night, she would have probably ended up doing the exact same. I mean the chances are high, DMT seemed to be unpredictable by nature. Who knows' what it does to different people? I smiled at my grandmother as I pictured her on DMT. That would have been something.

"Is this the kind of advice I'm supposed to think and ponder on?" I asked, smiling cheekily.

Maud laughed and shook her head. "I would say yes, but I also don't really care. Don't think about it, just stop spreading violence!" She winked again and we both laughed.

Maud stood up and picked up my cup. "I made you some food if you're hungry at all. You should probably sleep as soon as you can, even if you're not tired now, you'll probably fall asleep as soon as you try and the extra sleep can only help you heal faster."

"I would actually love to eat something, should I come to the kitchen?" I asked.

"Pah, please as if you'd expect me to let you get out of bed. Stay right here and I'll bring it in a moment. I made Spaghetti with Bolognese, I hope it's still your favorite, otherwise you'll just have to fake enjoy it." She left before the smile on my face had even reached its peak. Maud knew she had me at the word Bolognese. I absolutely loved Spaghetti with Bolognese. Seriously, some people took their pizza to the next level, some people wanted caviar on more caviar. But I would be damned if I could love any other dish more than I did love spaghetti with Bolognese. The dish was my Ambrosia. I couldn't eat the stuff fast enough.

Maud whistled while she walked towards the kitchen. I looked around for something to pass the time, finally deciding I might as well check my phone for any notifications.

I took my phone out of my bag and unlocked it. The seconds ticked away as the antenna in my iPhone, searched for a signal somewhere on the mountain. When it finally found a connection, my gut seemed to sink. There was nothing. I repeat, there was nothing. Not one shred of a shit. I had been beaten to an absolute pulp but my so-called friends seemed to care more about their evening plans than whether I was still alive or not.

I locked my phone, and placed it face down on the bedside table. I tried to justify the lack of interest on their behalf. Maybe only Evan knew about me having been in hospital. Given that I couldn't actually remember what had happened, it might be possible that Evan had been the only one left at the party. And he was probably still mad at me. Either way, maybe they did care. Or they didn't. But there was no way I was going to write to any of them, begging for attention.

The sound of Maud's feet rung through the hallway as she approached the entrance to the guest bedroom. A tray with a plate of Spaghetti Bolognese soon laid on my lap. My tongue was in motion before I'd even claimed the first bite. I was in good hands. Maud and Theresa would have me fixed up in no time.

Not one notification.

## Chapter 17: Just like that, it fell apart

The evening at Maud's flew by quickly and before I knew it Sunday was upon me. I slept through till about 11:00 or 12:00, staying in bed till about 15:00 or 16:00, being brought breakfast and lunch in bed and then taking a shower to freshen up one last time. The grogginess and dizziness had disappeared entirely, making it hard to believe that I'd been in the hospital at all.

At about 18:30, Maud and I got into her car to make the long return journey to Ryan's house, equipped with everything I had brought with for my overnight, as well as quite a weighty Tupperware box filled with more Spaghetti Bolognese. I had been instructed to hide the Spaghetti to my fullest ability and keep up the highest level of indiscretion, just in case Theresa got the untrue impression that I hated her food and needed my grandmothers cooking to save.

After one whole hour on the road, having listened to Kris Kristofferson's best hits *twice*, we arrived back on 11 Adley Road, pulling into the driveway as Ryan returned from walking the dogs. It was a rare sight to be perfectly honest, Ryan was a lot like how I'd been in Berlin, often too lazy to leave the house, and his eyes seemed to be squinting under the sun, unsure what to make of natural light.

Comparing Ryan to the lazy 'nerd' that I had been, (I wouldn't go so far to call myself a loser because after all I quite liked the life I had lived), wasn't entirely fair from my side, since Ryan did have a girlfriend who was real and would regularly 'do stuff' with Ryan in his bedroom. What exactly *doing stuff* was, I tried not to think about since I was still a hopeless ~~romantic~~ virgin, but the fact of the matter was that he was not going around setting things on fire and playing Minecraft.

Maud left and drove back on her own, leaving me in Theresa and Stephan's capable hands. The four of us, Ryan included, watched a Sunday movie in the living room and then went our separate ways to get a nice long sleep before the start of the week. Monday's always were a shock after a weekend and I could imagine it would hit me a lot harder than usual considering that I'd spent the majority of the last few days, dead to the world in a self-induced coma. Or self-induced lull, that wasn't actually self-induced but also kind of was.

Much to my surprise I woke up to my regular alarm, had no problem whatsoever to get up, and took my regular shower, and drunk my regular morning tea. It was just your average Monday, I didn't feel tired or short on sleep, I felt ready and excited to go see my friends and share with them the events that had unfolded on Friday evening. I was excited to tell them about my accidental

drug experience, but also felt very keen to find out what happened to me afterwards and why I was beaten up. I had given the whole night a lot of thought while lying in bed and resting but had come to conclude a whole load of nothing. It was infuriating not knowing,

I made my way to the breakfast table where Ryan was sitting, visibly struggling to stay awake as he ate his cereal. One spoonful, two spoonful's, and his head would slump down almost in a loop, in desperate need of further encouragement from Stephan, who was standing at the kitchen counter, making us our lunch to take with to school.

“Ryan eat your food!” Ryan’s head darted upright as he dropped his spoon spilling bits of milk and chocolate on the floor. He groaned as he picked it up. “Just leave me sleep dad.”

Stephan rolled his eyes, opting to simply ignore *morning* Ryan and greeted me instead. “Good morning Arlo. How are you feeling?” he asked, as he noticed me walking up to the kitchen counter.

“Not too bad, in fact I don’t think I’ve ever felt this awake at ten past seven in the morning!” I walked to the cupboard, taking a bowl out and filling it with milk and Ryan’s favorite cereal; Coco Pops. He ate about three or four value packs a week, eating through them like a rabbit eats through a supply of salad. He had thrown an actual tantrum before upon noticing that he’d eaten all the coco pops the day before.

Stephan smiled and patted me on the back. “That’s great to hear, maybe you can teach Ryan someday how easy it is to sleep a sufficient amount.” I laughed weakly, taking my bowl and sitting opposite to Ryan, who seemed to have nodded off again.

“Ryan, we’re leaving now” I whispered, startling him again as he jumped out of his seat.

“I’m ready let me just get my bag!” he shouted, seemingly out of habit. I didn’t even try to contain my laughter as Stephan rolled his eyes again and threw a piece of bread at the back of Ryan’s head.

“Sit down and eat your food Ryan, if you’re not ready at 07:30, then I sure hope you feel like walking to school” he shouted, clearly trying desperately to keep the amusement out of his voice. He smirked and shook his head, mumbling something about his sleep deprived son, and how if Ryan had been alive during World War II, he’d probably have woken up in 1945, not having noticed anything at all.

I continued smiling as I ate my cereal, watching Ryan continuously forcing his eyes open with his two fingers, as if he really thought that that would do the trick.

"How come you're so bloody tired? What the hell were you doing last night?" I asked, keeping my voice down so Stephan didn't hear me. Ryan turned around to face his dad and made sure that he was still focused on the sandwiches he was making.

"I got Ariana to send me nudes, but that took like a couple of hours, so I only ended up going to sleep at like 02:30." Ryan's tired face started to glow with pride, and the bags beneath his eyes seemed to blend away into his skin. "They're pretty good nudes too." He winked at me and continued eating his cereal, as if the power of his naked girlfriend had made him finally forget the fatigue he was feeling.

What a dude.

---

We arrived at Bergford the usual time, with fifteen minutes to spare before our day started. As we waited to cross the road, the lights changed quickly from red to green, and soon we were walking up the big grey steps, crossing through the main quad and heading to the area where the tenth graders usually hung out.

Ryan disbanded from our small group of two when he saw Ariana standing with her friends, outside the library away from the other tenth graders. I continued on my usual path, advancing on the corner that led to the crowd of other Bergfordians.

My heart thumped, I didn't know why. My nerves were tingling, I didn't know what to expect. I turned the corner and saw them all standing there. Evan, Emily, Layla and Grace, all members of the gang were huddled there in their circle. Nothing was different, they had even positioned themselves on the same spot they stood every morning, the home of the Evan gang. And even as I write it, I hate myself for it. But I don't have a better name than the Evan gang, even though I'm well aware that I didn't go to school in the Bronx.

I walked on over at a casual pace, a tempo and speed that my racing mind could in no ways relate to at this given moment. I breathed in slowly through my nose, thinking of what I wanted to say and how to say it. Thoughts. Usually I spoke, but now I thought. I thought a lot about what to say.

I entered the 'airspace' feeling at home, deciding to simply stand in the circle and announce my arrival, skipping over the whole individual greeting.

“So, who wants to bet that my Friday night was crazier than all of yours combined?” I asked, cracking what I thought to be a charming smile.

Something tensed, whether it was the air itself or simply the atmosphere, something felt wrong within the group. The faces around the circle looked utmost uncomfortable, unsure of where to direct their eyes, trying to avert their gazes to anything but me. Only Evan, stared straight at me, our line of sight meeting in a head on collision.

“Arlo, why don’t you just piss off back to Berlin?” I watched Evan’s mouth as it spoke, but something inside me refused to believe that he had said it. The faces that were present refused to say a word, the faces that surrounded me were speechless and scrunched up tight with a level of unpleasantness.

“What... What do you mean?” the words stammered and rolled out of my mouth, I wanted to think that this was some kind of joke, that they were trying to mess with me, teach me a lesson, anything but meaning what Evan had said.

“I think... We think, that you’re an annoying piece of shit who thinks way too highly of himself because people actually like him here.” Evan paused as he searched for more hurtful words. “Sorry, I meant to say, we think, that you’re an annoying piece of shit who thinks way too highly of himself because people actually *liked* him here. So why don’t you piss off, right back to Berlin, where people treated you the way you deserved, like shit.”

My blood began to boil, I was not a hot-headed kind of guy but being called names and belittled in public was something I wasn’t just going to sit around and watch happen to me.

“Do you actually have any idea what happened to me on Friday night? Do you actually have any idea...?” I honed in on Evan my voice raised, he was standing exactly opposite to me, and we were squaring each other up as the others in the group split into two rows on either side of us.

“Do you actually have any idea how many times you crossed every sort of fucking line that even exists? Do you actually have any idea how many people you disrespected and abused for no reason at all? What you called my sister? You’re a fucking asshole Arlo, why don’t you just FUCK OFF!” Evan interrupted me, raising his voice well above mine. His words made no sense to me but the look in his eyes told me that he believed every word he’d said. I looked around at my friends in the group, surely Evan was the only one that thought this, surely Evan was just pissed off because of the whole Hannah situation which I don’t deny having provoked?

I looked at Dylan, wise Dylan. He was looking at Evan with what could be identified as a pleading look, a look that might be begging for Evan to reconsider all of this. The look vanished as he felt my eyes, a guilty expression then forming on his face. Did he not care?

I looked at Layla and I looked at Grace, who offered me the same cold guilty treatment. I continued my search for even the slightest feeling of doubt, anyone at all who was unsure of Evan's opinion.

I looked at everyone part of that circle, all these people I had grown so close to over the last two months. Not one offered me anything other than a cold shoulder, a stinging blade, a ruthless hammer. It broke my heart, it broke my heart and it shattered my soul into thousands of tiny sharp little pieces. Betrayal, the first of the two most painful feelings of all, the first of the two feelings which can make a man break in half.

"I was drugged, you dickhead! I was tripping on fucking DMT and you just left me at the hospital!" I stammered, trying to maintain control over my emotions as hard as it was. Evan's eyes flared up briefly as I spoke. Something I'd said managed to breach his defenses, but of course he didn't let it show, instead choosing to end the whole thing with one lazy swing of the hammer.

"Fine then. If you won't fuck off, we will, don't bother coming over to us during the break. Find some others who won't mind another dickhead."

He stared at me for a moment longer before picking up his backpack and walking away. He didn't wait for anyone because he didn't need to. The others followed him like lost little sheep, the most not hesitating to look back at me, their unspeakable Judas, or something like that. But of course, one of them did look back, one of the people hesitated because she couldn't understand why I'd done what I'd done. She looked straight at me with big round sorrowful and shook her head.

Emily left then too, leaving me there in the now empty quad, cold on a warm spring day, broken more than I was in the hospital. Everything had become so wrong, everything had kicked me down and spat on me to watch me cry in the dirt of the ground. The bell for the start of class would have rung if bells existed. Not a soul was near in sight, not a teacher nor pupil. Just me, cold and alone and utterly perplexed as to what I had done. Abused, Evan had said abused.

There was no way that I was going to class in my current state. I exited the grounds through one of the unused side entrances, my backpack becoming heavier with every step I managed to take forwards. The colors were dimming, the sounds around me were becoming muffled, I was

feeling the opposite of high or drunk, I was feeling blind to all things I knew, and I was deaf to the sounds that those things would make.

I found myself walking along the sidewalk by Bergford, trapped on a single pedestrian path, by cars on either side of me, delirious to an extent and unsure of my direction. After a while I noticed I was sitting down, breathing slowly with nothing on my mind. The look in her eyes had stabbed me a thousand times. No matter what I thought of, nothing could heal the wound that that had opened.

The tears came all at once, without a warning water flooded my vision bringing back into focus my vision and hearing. The pain was so bloody, bloody bad, I just wanted it to stop and leave me alone, but the tears kept pouring and consuming me with something much worse than pain itself, the second worst feeling that could destroy a man's soul. Envy. I envied what I had lost, I envied what I could have had and I envied what I needed but couldn't have.

I knew I had never truly felt this, I was even unsure what it was supposed to feel like. But then I felt it, envy spread throughout every inch of my being, pairing up with the already existent feeling of betrayal and giving me the ultimate stabbing sensation.

And so it broke, my soul broke then and there on the floor of the street next to Bergford High School, the first time my soul had broken in 16 years of life. It broke, and it broke and it broke and it broke. Dark thoughts began to invade, magnifying the feelings and making it so much worse, extinguishing every other feeling I knew and leaving me only with the two that broke me, again and again.

Shivering and crying I stood up without much thought, betrayal and envy had control over me now, betrayal and envy could do what they wanted. Through my sobbing eyes I saw the trees whizz slowly by, I knew I was walking but not where to, I felt the strain that pulled my feet but not the reason why they were being strained. Everything had become pointless, nothing that remained in the confinements of my mind was a pleasantry seeking to fill me with joy.

I walked normally, at a normal pace without staggering once, my arms hung loosely at my sides and if weren't for the wreckage that was my face, bloodshot eyes with tears still streaming down my cheeks, I would have looked like any old kid, skipping school to go to the mall. I was not going to the mall.

While sniveling desperately for air through my nose, the stench of fresh tar filled my nostrils and made them fiery hot, not quite qualifying as a burning sensation but nevertheless a

better feeling than the other two that dominated me. I looked to see where the tar was being laid down, the tears still flowing like an endless river, but the tar was nowhere to be seen. Cars zoomed by on the main road, heading to the city or heading to Wynberg, the white taxis filled to the brim, driving to their destination for nothing more than a couple of rand. They didn't know street rules, they just stopped whenever and wherever they pleased. Lawless, like the Wild West, they drove around laying down their own path, disregarding their forbearers and choosing their own destiny.

Right now, in this moment, I wanted to be a white Taxi, I wanted to be lawless and choosing of my own destiny, white Taxis didn't cry and feel betrayal, white taxis couldn't afford to have their souls broken because without their souls they wouldn't make any money. I wanted to be a white taxi, being a white taxi could solve all my problems so quickly, and then it came again without me wanting it so. Envy flooded every broken chamber of my soul, again and again, I knew I could never be a white taxi and that made me envious because I wanted to be one. I felt betrayed, betrayed by my mind for even letting me think that I could be a white Taxi. It was ridiculous I know, but in a few short moments I had become the ultimate pessimist, if you would have told me the happiest thing in the world I would have picked it apart and shown you a cold truth behind it to make you cry and yearn for something that I couldn't destroy.

I kept walking, still crying not really trying to stop the stinging in my eyes but wondering rather when I would run out of tears. I had read somewhere that one can only cry a certain amount, that after a while your eyes would dry up and be unable to produce a single tear. I saw myself as a test subject, to argue against a hypothesis whether proven or not, to see if I could debunk it by crying forever and ever, it's not like I had any plans anyways, nothing I had wanted to do, nothing I had done already was worth anything anymore.

I arrived at the end of the main road section that ran along Bergford and entered the side street walking past the Pizza delivery service. The smell that usually made me hungry and filled me with a certain kind of happiness, only made me feel envious of the people inside, the people who were happy to an extent and making money like a white taxi. The dough and cheese, the tomato sauce and all the wondrous toppings interested me in no way at all, even if I had had money with me there was not one still functioning part of me that wanted a slice of pizza if my life depended on it.

I continued ahead and entered the next shop just to get off the road I was on, taking off my blazer as I did so. I walked down the aisles filled with various items, it was one of those shops that

sold anything and everything. If you were in need of it then you could probably find it here at *Bergford Stores*. Candy, tobacco, soft drinks, bread the list would go on and on and on. Nothing interested me in the slightest, it was the first time in my pubescent life that the pornographic magazines failed to grab my attention even for a moment. I walked on by with my blazer dragging on the floor, catching up dust as though it was covered in honey.

The tears were becoming less and less, I knew that I would lose this battle, I could not cry forever and ever, despite it being my soul's final wish. Then she shouted across the shop, through the aisles directing the full force of her voice at me alone.

"You, boy, how dare you not wear your blazer outside of school! And to drag it through the dirt like that! Turn around and face me, boy." I didn't recognize the voice, but it was filled with venom and despise, and it was a voice I instantly hated. I laughed, I actually gave off a cold dry chuckle and turned around with two words in mind.

"Fuck you" I whispered, the words reaching the teacher nonetheless. Ms. Cliffords stood there stunned in silence, a coffee cup in the one hand and a newspaper in the other. Her jaw hung slightly open, she was speechless for once, the stupid bitch always had something to say but today without even meaning to I had shut her up. That felt great, amongst the two sole feelings still reigning within me, I felt great for having shut up a person I despised.

"What...?" Ms. Cliffords stammered, I now felt the power Evan must have felt earlier while ripping into me with his razor-sharp words.

"I said, fuck you." It was the easiest thing I'd done in a while, those simple words rolled smoothly out of my mouth. I wanted her to react with the full hatred and bitchiness I knew she was capable of, I wanted her to give me the same three hours of detention as before. I wanted to sit somewhere and drown in my own sadness.

She slowly collected herself, her mouth closing as she thought of how to deal with me, maybe she noticed the tears in my eyes or maybe she noticed how much of a wreck I looked, but I knew deep down she wouldn't give a shit. Ms. Cliffords had all the reason she needed to come down fast on me with her iron fist. And that made losing the battle, so much easier, even if it wasn't really worth calling a battle. It was a kamikaze suicide blast.

"So that's how it is? Fine, for not having your blazer on outside of school, two hours of detention. For defiance, four hours of detention. Six in total and you have two weeks to sit through your punishment. Maybe you'll learn some respect after this, you ungrateful worm." The penny

dropped, the numbness I had been bathing in seeped away and left me stuck suddenly in the harsh reality of what I'd just done to myself. Six hours of detention, six hours of staring at a brick wall and trying to count the amount, again!

My soul was broken, I was feeling betrayed and envious yes, but the reality had become what it was to me, reality, there was no way of looking past it now.

Ms. Cliffords turned around and left, a big fat smile on her face, she didn't care that I had been rude to her, she didn't care that I might have been in a bad place, she cared only that I got the punishment I 'deserved'. Holy shit, I really hated this woman. I mean she wasn't pleasant, but I had somehow find it in my heart to outright despise her. And I didn't even feel guilty, just annoyed that I had let her win so easily, I had attacked and lost. It was my fault.

At that moment, the sudden realization of my great mistake ringing loud and clear, the tears stopped and a general sense of feeling slowly returned to me in bite sizes. The feelings of betrayal and envy minimized themselves into a dark corner of my mind, I would be lying if I'd said they'd disappeared completely, but the feelings that had caused the initial spurt of ultimate pain became a shadow hiding somewhere in the distance.

I looked around to properly take in my surroundings, not that a clearer view of where I was would ease my pain even if I tried. I headed to the exit of the shop with no clear intentions of where to go. I was fully aware now of my surroundings, I wasn't in the same trance that had brought me here and caused me so much stress, but I was hurting, still hurting and I knew deep down that that wasn't going to change within a matter of hours. This was a different harsher kind of pain, the kind that left you weak and tired, the kind that made you yearn to feel anything different, anything at all that wasn't the pain.

I took out my phone to check the time and was surprised to see a message from Dylan, sent shortly after school had begun. I wasn't pleasantly surprised, it didn't give me joy to see that someone maybe cared, it didn't make me feel warm and fuzzy that one of my presumed friends had a heart after all. In fact, I didn't even open it. I put my phone back in my pocket and decided to walk home.

11 Adley road was a long walk away, at least forty minutes but I didn't care. Theresa would be there to look after me, I'd tell her I was sick because in a way I was and she'd let me lie down and maybe make me some bacon. If she didn't make me bacon I would go downstairs and take some Spaghetti Bolognese and warm it up in the microwave. All these things, Theresa's love and

care, bacon and Spaghetti Bolognese, the mere thoughts of them would usually cheer me up. But not in this instance, this cut was deeper than all the cuts I'd felt before, this time I knew that no one and nothing would make feel alright for I would have to bleed out on my own, no plaster would do the trick.

The air stung my eyes as I went on my way, the white taxis still drove by carelessly and worry free. Everything made me sad, everything around me seemed to be shot in black and white, there was nothing funky about my surroundings, there was nothing that engaged my beaten and abused mind.

There was one notification.

## Chapter 18: Mi padre pops by

I arrived at home and rang the doorbell, surprising Theresa who hadn't been expecting anyone. After her initial worried questions, she kindly accepted that I was simply not feeling well, although she did question my puffy eyes and asked for an explanation. I bade her to give me time, because I felt so sick, and because Theresa was the woman that she was, she was fine with it and let me go upstairs without another word.

I arrived in the room I had left only an hour or two earlier, and dropped my bag and blazer on the floor, taking off my shirt and pants and climbing underneath the thick wooly duvet. My room smelt fresh, the cleaning lady always opened the windows in the mornings, much to my relief since I hadn't opened them once since my arrival. I was rather too hot than too cold at any time, and opening windows would somehow always cause the latter.

I breathed in deeply, I felt as tired as though I'd been hospitalized all over again, and I think when it comes down to it I would have rather been in the hospital than experience the incredible sorrow that lived within me now. And I know how shitty that sounds.

I lay there for about an hour with an empty mind, as soon as I would think of anything it would disappear and leave a blank space and yet I couldn't sleep, for one whole hour my mind refused to let me sleep or think.

Theresa entered the room, rescuing me from my temporal immobilization, sitting on the same chair she had sat on no less than two days before. The feeling of *déjà vu* washed over me as the story I had made up for Theresa came back into my mind and presented itself as though it wanted to be told again. I looked at Theresa who was saying nothing, she was just sitting there still and quiet looking back at me with such warmth in her eyes, warmth that I didn't think existed in the world anymore. I started to cry, it was a different kind of crying than before, this time I was crying because there was someone who cared for me despite all that I had thought, and there was still Theresa, still my mother, still my father, and my whole family. I was not alone, that's what they wanted me to think and feel, Evan, his gang and Ms. Cliffords, they all wanted me to perish in my own sadness

Theresa knelt on the floor next to the bed and wrapped her arms around me, stroking my head. I wanted to stop crying, I know I must have looked like shit but the tears kept flowing regardless of my strain, I tried to keep them walled up behind my eyes but they would break through and pour out in pairs. I muttered something, I was unsure of what I wanted to say but with

the tears flowing down my face I was unable to formulate the word. Theresa hugged tighter, trying to pour her warmth into me, trying everything in her limited power to vanquish my sorrow and bring light into my heart and soul.

“Hush, Arlo, hush, it’s all going to be alright” she whispered so I could hear it, over and over and over again, with the same tone and caring sound. It went on for five or six minutes, every time I’d thought the tears had finally stopped they renewed themselves and made me shiver, forcing Theresa to stay with me and continue hugging me, repeating the same phrase over and over and over again. It was warm, I wasn’t too warm but Theresa did make me feel a certain warmth that my duvet simply couldn’t offer me, the kind of warmth that came from someone’s soul.

I couldn’t do that anymore, I couldn’t warm up Theresa or anyone else, for my soul was broken lying in some bottomless pit deep within me. I knew it wasn’t permanent and I knew that somehow it would heal again but in this moment, I couldn’t and it made me cry even more.

After I’d finally stopped, Theresa released me, sitting back down on her chair and looking at me with the same kind eyes. “Do you want to talk about it? Is it about that girl?” she asked, raising her eyebrows. I didn’t want to talk about it, I was worried talking about it would only put me in a worse space than I already was in, but my mother had always told me to talk about something if it was bothering you, bothersome thoughts could taint a person’s will to survive.

I took a deep breath and gritted my teeth, trying to forget the emotional attachment I held to the situation. “Evan and all my friends have decided not to be my friends anymore.” Theresa looked at me carefully, her expression softening even more as if it was made of butter. “Apparently I did some things on Friday that hurt them, I was an asshole or something like that.” My breathing became heavier as I felt the feelings inside me swirl and try to make sense of it all, *again*. Evan’s voice played on repeat, “What you said to my sister?”

“Do you not remember what you did, Arlo ?” asked Theresa carefully, she knew she was treading on thin ice, any sort of wrong motion or sentence could set me off again, it wasn’t her fault but it was still true. I blinked once and then I blinked again, thinking of what it was I’d thought I’d done, desperately trying to make sense of what had happened that night, *again*.

“I think... I think I did something bad to Evan, although I didn’t think it was bad at the time... I still don’t think it’s bad but... Evan thinks it’s bad and so Evan made everyone hate me and now... well now... she hates me too.” My last words stung the most, I didn’t need to explain it to Theresa, she knew exactly what I meant, she knew exactly why I was in such pain. Evan and

my friends had damaged my soul, the hatred I had felt from them was unpleasant and dissatisfying, an unconceivable pain but bearable yet. The hatred from Emily on the other hand was what had broken my soul and made me weep now, the betrayal from Emily was the only thing that could hurt me. My Achilles heel, my one vulnerability, and it had been exploited. And even though I didn't say anything to Theresa, I think she knew I'd done something to Emily, and weirder still I think she was fully aware that I had no idea what it was.

This was the moment I finally realized it, the look in Theresa's eyes that said she understood. Fuck. It took me being broken in half to actualize something I'd known from the first day.

"Theresa, I think I..." I started but Theresa shook her head and interrupted me.

"Don't say it now, I know what you mean, don't say it now." I trusted her enough, I didn't say it, but everything had become so crystal clear now, everything inside of me was beginning to make sense. She wasn't just some girl I wanted to hook up with, she wasn't just some girl that I felt really strongly about and she wasn't just some girl that made me happy every time I saw her and every time I was able to spend time with her. No, she was so much more than that, there was a reason my soul had broken apart for her, there was a reason I was pathetic without her in my midst. I was in love with her, I didn't know how I knew, I didn't know why it was true but damn it, it was. I had fallen helplessly in love with Emily, and now it had all just gone to shit, my soul was broken and my heart ached, she didn't want to see me again and no matter how hard I tried to convince myself otherwise, it seemed that my love would always be a one-way street.

"I'm going to go make you some bacon now. Listen to some music or something, try not to think about anything... negative." Theresa stood up and put her hand on my shoulder, resting it there for a few seconds before leaving my room. I looked straight at the ceiling, trying to make the white color I saw appear in my mind, to tipex out all the new thoughts racing through it. My eyes hurt, open or closed it didn't matter. My eyes were a physical representation of what I felt on the inside, raw and beaten, prone to any sizeable attack no matter from whom or what. I wanted to sleep, I wanted my body to activate its suitable defenses and shower me with happy dreams where I could fly and sing, laugh and win. It was a cute hope, an empty one, my mind would much rather corrupt me and tease me, flood me with various images of Emily and the 'happy' times we had spent together. It was torture, the causal montage wouldn't end, sometimes the same images sometimes new ones, I felt like I had been stabbed at least a thousand times and yet every time I'd

slip into the abyss, I was brought back, to suffer more. And then the drumroll, the drumroll before the kiss that never came, started banging in my ears louder and louder as though it was trying to make my eardrums pop. Bad dum, Ba dum, Ba dum, Bad dum Ba dum, Ba dum, Bad dum, Ba dum, Ba dum, Bad dum... Ba dum. It felt like my heart beating, my heart beating in my ears, no peace just torturous beating.

The smell of bacon accompanied by an angel, wafted into my room like a breeze, a welcome distraction from my captor's wishes. Theresa sat down on the chair and handed me the plate of bacon a weak smile present on her lips. It's not that I didn't appreciate her efforts, it's not like I couldn't tell that she wasn't doing everything in her power to help me, to cheer me up, to mend my broken soul. But it just wasn't possible to help me now, the only way to get out of this mess was a solo mission to illuminate my mind.

"Your dad is going to come by later" said Theresa, as though it was obvious. The thoughts stopped, the visions of the girl I was in love with froze and shattered away like my soul had done earlier. *What? My dad?* My breathing slowed as I thought about what Theresa had said, my dad was coming to this house later?

"My dad, Peter Schreiber, is coming by 11 Adley Road later today?" I asked, my voice free of anything but confusion. Theresa nodded and smiled a little more, still choosing her words carefully.

"Don't tell me you forget that your dad was coming? He arrived last night, I thought you knew, me and your grandmother were talking about it. After all, you're all spending the weekend in Bontebok game reserve for your grandmother's birthday!" November 1<sup>st</sup>, how could I have forgotten? My grandmother's birthday was this weekend and the entire Schreiber family and my father were coming over just for the occasion! We had rented out a small game reserve even, it was more of a family reunion than just my grandmother's birthday. How could I have forgotten?

"That's this weekend already?" I asked. Theresa nodded again.

"I guess time flies by when you're having... Well, time flies by" she replied, giving off a very quiet, nervous laugh. Having fun, I guess she wanted to say that the time flies by when you're having fun, because that's all I'd been having before today. I gulped as the sour reminder hit me at full force, prompting me to feel pain once again. I was almost getting used to it now, it was just there the same thing, over and over and over again. No point in over thinking, no point in dwelling on the poison fruits granted by the devil. My father was coming, it would be nice to see him, it

would be nice to have another shoulder to cry on, just to give Theresa a break, I think she deserved one after all that she'd done.

"What time will he be here?" I asked.

"At about 3:30 or so," said Theresa, "Why don't you eat some bacon?" she asked, still working her meek smile.

I smiled a fake smile to match hers, just because I thought it might please her, and shoved a strip of bacon down my throat. She saw right through my conjured deception, I don't even know why I thought it might have worked. "You don't have to smile if you don't want to, Arlo. You don't have to do anything if you don't want to."

I knew what she meant, she wasn't talking about household chores, she wasn't talking about family things, she was talking about things that made me uncomfortable, she was talking about things that people forced other people to do, just so someone could feel good about themselves.

Theresa was a fantastic woman, she knew what she was doing in every way she did it. I admired her, there was no other way of putting it, and because of her a very small feeble genuine smile tugged at my lips, as the slightest sign of warmth tingled in my toes, not quite warm and strong enough to expand, but present nonetheless.

"Does it taste good?" she asked, beckoning to the bacon.

I nodded and spoke with my mouth still full. "It's delicious"

She smiled again and nodded. "I really can make bacon you know, what other skills does one even need if you can make bacon the way that I can?" she said, obviously still trying to cheer me up. I nodded again and gave a short grunt in place of a laugh and looked at my plate. I could feel Theresa's eyes still staring at me, the warmth they radiated was directed at my head.

I looked again at her and met her eyes. "Stephan is mine." She said, pausing and treading on the ice carefully. "We all have that person we'd jump off a cliff for."

.....

Once I'd finished eating my bacon, Theresa left me alone and suggested that I sleep a little, before my dad was to come so I would look a little *fresher* than I did now. Considering the plentiful amount of sleep I had had, it was nothing but ridiculous that the bags beneath my eyes had returned, and that my eyelids draped down lower every few seconds, yearning for closure. But I guess it

wasn't that crazy, emotional circumstances could be just as strenuous as the physical ones, and Theresa of course knew that, being the intelligent woman that she was.

I slept on and off for about four hours, waking up at about ten to four, wondering where my father was. When he was traveling on his own, he was usually a punctual guy never much later than one or two minutes, he was only late when he was traveling with the family.

I took my phone out of the pocket of my pants which were still lying on the floor where I'd left them earlier on, to see if maybe my dad had sent me a message. There was still just one notification, just one message and it wasn't from my dad. I ignored it again and put my phone on my desk, not wanting to put myself in the same state I had been in a few hours ago, not wanting to remind myself of the imminent pain I knew was still in place. I folded the duvet diagonally and got out of bed, putting on a tracksuit pants and some house shoes. I was about to leave, still shirtless but decided that I should probably present myself with even half decency, and so I pulled on a t-shirt I had lying around.

I picked up the empty plate from my desk and left my room, going downstairs to the kitchen looking for Theresa. The light was switched off in the kitchen, which was an unusual phenomenon.. I washed off my plate with water and put it in the dishwasher, heading over to the cupboard with the glasses in it and taking one out and filling it with water. The cool water soothed my throat, as I walked with the glass still in my hand to continue the search for Theresa and maybe my dad.

I started hearing the faint sound of voices, probably coming from the living room and so I went in that direction, going through my hair with my hand to make it look like I *hadn't* been sleeping the entire morning. I pushed open the door, and saw the back of my father's head, the black curly unkempt hair, and the general familiar presence he displayed. It was as soothing if not more soothing than the water in my hand, and I suddenly felt even more at home than I had in the last two months.

Theresa noticed me first, putting down her tea on the coffee table and standing up. "And so, he's alive!" she said, a great big smile on her face which was probably due to some joke my father had been telling her. My father also stood up and turned around, a similar smile present on his face.

"Arlo! My boy, how have you been?" he asked, coming towards me and giving me a huge embrace and refusing to let go. I smiled my second rare genuine smile of that day, this one being

bigger and surer than the first and although my dad couldn't see it I knew he could feel it, that I truly was more than happy to see him.

My dad and I were extremely close, it had always been that way between us. We rarely if ever got into fights, and although those fights were close to nuclear fallout, we would always make up and have a stronger bond than we did before. Considering this we had only talked once or twice during my entire exchange, this being due to the fact that he 'doesn't do forced skype' which is what he called it when my mother would order him to skype with me, we were as close as ever before.

Our embrace broke apart and he sat back down, beckoning to the seat beside him for me to sit on. I sat down and drank some more water, taking a dramatic pause before finally saying a word.

"Apart from being beaten up on the weekend, I've been pretty great if you sum it up. I'm one of the best students at math in my class and I'm also one of the only people who understands the physics being taught, which is nice" I said, nodding my head as though in agreement with myself.

My dad laughed rather grimly and looked at Theresa who was watching me carefully. I guess she was wondering if I was going to say anything, I guess she was wondering if I would keep up the façade my rescuing sleep had built for me, or break down for my father as I had for her. I was going to keep up the façade. There wasn't really a point in breaking down, and let's be real, for the story it would be a bit repetitive.

"Theresa was telling me about your adventure on Friday, and so I told her about the time I refused to be robbed in Ghana and went against three guys with crowbars. I got beaten up pretty badly but on the upside I was the only guy who got to keep all his stuff. Stupidity seems to run in the family" he said laughing with me, as he gently punched me on the shoulder.

"Let's not tell your mother about this by the way. She might, eh, overreact." We both shared another good laugh and a knowing glance. After a few seconds of silence, he searched for things to say, it was obvious on his face. Me and my dad were close, very close, but whereas me and my mother would always talk for ages on end (She was usually starting the conversations and asking questions), me and my father would sometimes just sit there without exchanging a single word, just enjoying each other's company for what it was. And so he searched, the uncomfortable

milliseconds turned into seconds, and when he finally said something, I was about to say something too.

“So what did you-” I said.

“What did you get for-” he said.

We both laughed and exchanged awkward smiles, slightly embarrassed, without really being so. My dad gestured to me, offering me the chance to speak first. Theresa was just sitting quietly on her chair, drinking her tea and laughing at the two of us.

“You two are literally the same person. I swear. Now I know where Arlo gets it all from, the humor and charisma” she said winking at me. I blushed a little and so did my dad as we both shuffled in our seats unsure of how to respond. I now also knew where I got my inability to act normally when complimented. Thanks papa.

“Thanks” I managed, smiling at Theresa before looking back at my dad. “I was going to ask what you got Maudi for her birthday. I wanted to get her...” My dad rolled his eyes and shook his head vigorously.

“What?” I asked.

“This is actually ridiculous, Arlo. Theresa already thinks we’re the same, and here you go asking the same questions as me” said my dad, again punching me playfully on the shoulder. “That’s what I was going to ask you!”

I did my awkward shuffle again as I built up to my confession. “Well the thing is I haven’t gotten her anything yet” I said, slightly embarrassed again for having forgotten my grandmother’s birthday up to this point.

My father grunted and nodded turning to Theresa. “Told you he wouldn’t have anything yet, you owe me twenty rand” said my dad. I laughed in disbelief.

“You bet that I would have forgotten to get something for my grandmother’s birthday?” I asked. My father nodded, no shame apparent on the tapestry that was his face.

“You’ll be glad that you forgot when I suggest to you what I have in mind. If you want to make your grandmother REALLY happy, then you’ll team up with me and make a work of art” he said, smiling his salesman smile.

“I’m listening” I said, my eyebrows narrowing as I prepared myself for the pitch to come.

“‘85 reason why we love Maudi’. A book, with 85 different little reasons why we love Maudi, I’ll supply the pictures, I’ll get it formatted and printed all you have to do is write. And it’s

not like writing's very difficult for you, plus you only have to do half of the reasons, I'll do the other half" he said, pausing before unloading the one sentence that always convinced me, "And you don't have to pay a single cent. Copious amounts of happiness for my mother and it's free to do. How can you not be in?" he asked, smiling still with a certain look in his eyes that said he already knew he had me hooked.

I nodded my head. "Of course I'm in, it's not like you expected me to say no"

He laughed and nodded his head as well. "You're right, I really didn't expect you to say no." He turned to Theresa and spoke to her. "You see my son Arlo here, simply doesn't like paying for things from his own money, so he's very good with giving away free gifts. And if someone offers him the chance of making a free gift, he's even more interested because it means less organizational effort for him. Correct me if I'm wrong Arlo" he said turning back to me.

I shook my head and laughed "Of course you're right, I'm a lazy sod we all know it." Theresa and my dad laughed too, and my dad reached out his arm and ruffled my hair.

"At least you're my lazy sod!"

If this had been one of those live TV shows, this would have been that typical part where the audience would have given off a big fat hefty sigh. *Awww*, I can hear it even now. My life was pretty much a TV show.

"Anyways, I should get going again, I'm sure I'll meet Ryan and Stephan when I drop you off on Sunday. I still have to visit two Golf courses today for the website, and that preferably, before they close at 20:00!" said Peter, standing up and reaching out his hand to Theresa. "It was so lovely meeting you, continue doing whatever you've been doing with Arlo, because he seems... Well, human!" he said, shaking Theresa's hand and turning back to me again.

"And you keep doing whatever you've been doing because they clearly seem to like you here. Don't mess it up" he winked and I laughed, shaking my head. "Also try and have the present for Maudi done by tomorrow, so I can print the book. I'll pick you up on Thursday at about 3:30 from school" he gave me another tight hug and ruffled my hair one last time.

Theresa walked ahead followed by my dad, and together the three of us walked towards the house door to see him off. The door buzzed open and my dad went outside, walking over towards a silver Peugeot which I assumed was his rental car. He got inside and looked back one more time, shooting me another of his loving smiles that said everything was going to be alright.

And then he drove off, full steam ahead, driving a little faster than he would have, had my mom been in the car.

The fourth or fifth genuine smile invaded my grumpy look, as I realized just how nice it was to see my dad after such a long time. He hadn't changed, not as much as me, I don't even think he'd noticed I'd changed but I knew I had. No one else might see the changes, but to me, I felt like I had shed my skin like a snake.

I cleared my mind and watched the thin trail of smoke hang in the air for a moment's hesitation where the Peugeot had driven.

"So that's my dad. He's kind of an idiot, just like me" I said to Theresa as we turned around and closed the door behind us, walking into the kitchen simply out of habit. Theresa laughed as she took out two glasses from the cupboard and filled them with lime cordial and water.

"You're the two nicest idiots I've ever met, that's for sure."

I smiled and took the first sip of my lime cordial. The bitter sweet taste filled my mouth, taking temporal control of my taste buds. Theresa raised the green bottle and pointed to my glass.

"It's good, isn't it? Do you want some more?" she asked. I laughed sheepishly and handed her my glass, muttering the word please and taking a seat at the table.

"What did you guys talk about while I was asleep?" I asked. Theresa hesitated and looked half over her shoulder. She didn't say anything at first, then she brought over the glasses and sat down at the table with me.

"Your dad was just wondering how you'd been doing, if you'd been having fun and stuff like that. I told him how close you'd become with Ryan which made him pretty happy. I think he might have been worried about you not getting on well with him" she said, still smiling.

"I take it you told him about earlier on?" I asked, deciding to just stop beating around the bush and come right out and ask. I wasn't actually sure why I was asking at all. It wasn't going to change anything, it wasn't like more people knowing was suddenly going to make everything better.

"I did tell him. I didn't want him to upset you and ruin your reunion" said Theresa, dropping her smile in an act of sincerity. I cherished her honesty. And it made me wonder how it was possible for the two of us to have such an amazingly positive relationship. I had somehow managed a full house and I didn't even know how to play poker.

“OK. Thanks for that” I said, trying to sound genuinely thankful. She nodded her head but said nothing and so we shared the silence while drinking our lime cordial.

Once I’d finished I stood up, deciding to do the first productive thing of my entire day. “I think I’ll go upstairs and start writing the thing for my grandmother if that’s ok” I said, taking my glass to the sink to wash it out.

“Of course, I’ll call you down when dinner’s ready” said Theresa, taking out the pans from the cupboard and heating up the stove.

I spared not a moment longer and headed up the stairs and into my room. I sat down at my desk, booting up my laptop for the first time in a week. My head was humming with words, excitement was crackling throughout my body. My hand began to twitch as I waited for Microsoft Word to open a blank page.

I felt my fingers hitting the keys, forming the words that were so quickly appearing in my mind. What I was feeling was a familiar feeling, it was the ultimate feeling of control, a coping mechanism, and I was in charge. I loved it, it was the reason why I wrote, and didn’t need friends. I didn’t need friends. Just me, myself and a blank page were more than sufficient. It had to be true.

A lone tear rolled down my cheek and hit the letter ‘c’ on my keyboard. I continued writing.

## Chapter 19: The blindly written poem

I finished my 40 reasons later that night and went to sleep with words swimming in my mind. The experience had been therapeutic, for lack of a better word, and as I drifted off to sleep that evening, I felt a lot better than I thought I would be able to. I knew that there was something very wrong going on inside me, that there was still a part of me in absolute shambles that didn't know how to begin again, but the writing had helped me to separate myself from that wrongness.

I went to school the next day, staying close by Ryan's side, making new acquaintances with his friends and trying to avoid the *others* as best I could. I knew that they were watching me, Dylan and Layla, Grace and Evan maybe even Emily. They were watching to see how their actions had been received, if it had all been worth it. And I hoped therefore that they were watching, I hoped that they saw the façade I kept sturdy. Arlo was happy, Arlo was balling. Arlo was not a helpless heap of depression.

There were a few moments during the day when the pain came back little by little, trying to consume me and tear me apart. I thought back to the words that I had written, the words that I had created despite all the hatred that surrounded me, and with those words I would feel strong again and just go on. The day went by quickly, without any major incidents and before I knew it I was at home again, sitting at my desk and turning on my computer.

I had finished my grandmother's birthday present. It was a finished product and I was happy with it, but working on it the night before had also made me realize how many things there were that called to me, that yearned to be written about, that yearned to be remembered. There was so much that was part of me, that made up the humanity of my life, which could be put down in words if I only gave it a try. So, I did.

Once the page had loaded up before me, I pulled the trigger and wrote down the title I knew my piece would answer to. *Chain it to the wall*. And then I chained it all up. The angst of a sixteen-year-old, hopelessly in love. The feelings of betrayal and envy that pulled on me to consume me with their temptation. I chained it all up, the words again spilling out of my fingertips, one by one I created my work. It took me about a half an hour. And it wasn't my best work but it was raw, to the point, heartthrob and above all, it rhymed if you put some effort into it.

I gave off a dry laugh after reading it for the third time, and then placed it in an envelope in which it would stay, until I set it on fire a few weeks later.

It started long before,  
The party wild and sore,  
Long before it started,  
Long before we parted.

The first few days at Bergford school,  
I knew you could easily make me a fool,  
That you did within five short days,  
And that Friday I tired, abandoned by rays.

The party that night, escalated out of the blue,  
But what pushed me further from one, pushed me closer to you  
That weekend I thought, deeply and hard,  
And during the week I let down my guard.  
I realized what I wanted, was always right there,  
That you were great and special, clever and fair.

But sadly for me, it's not yet the end,  
Helplessly, I went around the bend,  
The following party, was worse than before,  
And drinking so much, turned out less than galore.

20 Long minutes I lay there with you,  
20 long minutes we talked me and you,  
20 long minutes, I acted like a fool,  
20 long minutes, is it over with you?

The envelope was placed under a stack of books. I started to cry.

## Chapter 20: A Brief Excerpt from the High Times

You know that part in the story where the protagonist has fallen about as far as they can fall? Like they've finally reached rock bottom, even if it would make the story better there's just no room left for falling further. That's where I'd finally arrived on the Thursday before my grandmother's birthday party. And though there are many ways for the protagonist to portray their arrival at this deepest depth, I proceeded to do something I would have never dreamed of doing before my arrival in Cape Town. I decided to smoke a joint by myself, the first step towards becoming a stoner.

The paper began to fizz up and burn as the flame from the lighter licked it with its sharp tongue. Bright warm light was then intruded upon by a sticky smell which continued to invade each of my nostrils, burying itself deep within my very senses. It'll be on in a moment. In one short moment, I wouldn't even remember why I had resorted to blaze away Evan's last gift; a joint of the finest, organic herbs, directly from the Transkei, a holy sanctuary for weed lovers. A joint was maybe all I had left from the friendship, but I'd decided saving it up would just be stupid. It was meant to be smoked after all.

I inhaled. One huge hit. I felt it immediately. All the dark swirling thoughts which were so heavy on my fragile mind, disappeared and ceased to be. Happiness, I was suddenly filled with an oh so real to the bone happiness, something to keep me warm, something to remind me why I loved this God sent planet. It wasn't God sent. I know, but still, come on, God sent sounds damn important, and that's what I'm going for after all, so God sent it was, at least for now.

Another hit, another wave of confidence and naivety, another step further from the pool shed at 11 Adley Road, and another step further from the truth and reality. The next seven hits morphed into one slow action which flowed very mystically like a river in an elven garden. I was really, really high. Like, really, really high. I laughed. So fucking high.

I put out the joint and threw it over the garden fence once I'd made sure it was fully out. The air was dank, I wasn't going to pretend it wasn't, but I now felt extremely relieved, that Stephan and Theresa had long since retired to their beds. The only person still possibly awake would be Ryan considering his abnormal sleeping habits. But Ryan wasn't a threat, so I was unphased.

As I crept back inside the house as quietly as I could in my hazy stupor, I tried desperately to resist the urge that had grown within me. I should have gone straight up the stairs, it was late

enough already and tomorrow I had to get up early to drive out to the game reserve with my brother and father, but this urge was strong, by God it was strong. It hadn't even been there just a moment ago but holy mother of God, now it was all that defined my existence. *I needed something, anything, and I mean ANYTHING, to eat*, I thought, giving up my hopes of going to sleep in the next ten minutes and turning towards the kitchen.

*Coco Pops!* I opened the cupboard above me and groped around until I found the box filled to the brim with Ryan's heavenly snack. Now I just needed a bowl, a spoon, some milk and we were ready to go!

I dropped the Coco Pops on the floor. Damnit that was loud. Great, I hadn't even gotten to the bowl and spoon part yet and here I was trying out for Metallica. I was clearly not to be trusted with satisfying the urge within me. I call it an urge and not a hunger, given that the feeling can't just be simplified to a simple hunger. That's not what it is, I had had dinner just an hour and a half ago, this feeling was more of a craving for something tasty in my mouth. I probably didn't even need to swallow whatever I put in there, if it made my tongue orgasm with pleasure, I would have reached the place I wanted to be at.

That's just apparently what weed did to me. I didn't remember it from the last time I'd smoked, then again on that Friday evening I'd been way too preoccupied with getting beaten up to think about snacking or how good something tasty would feel on my tongue. The first time though, had been almost identical to this. I remembered it with amusement, Violet telling me where the food was and me immediately getting up with only thoughts of glorious food in my mind.

I laughed out loud before stopping myself. Here I was trying not to be noisy and I was laughing about my ridiculous urge as well as dropping the equivalent of a musical instrument in the food industry (yes, the Coco Pops) on the floor. I calmed myself trying to focus on the task at hand. I picked up the Coco Pops. Check one. I opened the next cupboard door and carefully slid out a bowl without knocking it against anything. Check two. I slowly, literally at the pace of a centimeter a second pulled out the drawer containing the cutlery and gently lifted a spoon out. Its metal surface seemed to gleam and smile at me. Check three.

*No!* I stopped what I was doing. An unforeseen problem had suddenly come across my path. I was out of hands to carry the milk! Could I really trust myself to prepare the meal in the kitchen, silently without making a mess, as well as carrying it up the stairs without spilling on the way? No, no I could not. But I did it anyways, and if Stephan and Theresa had slept even remotely

close to the kitchen, they would have been awoken by what must have been an orchestra of kitchen noises. You have no idea how hard it is to prepare one measly bowl of Coco Pops!

I creaked up the stairs and made it into the safe haven of my room. All the other lights in the house had been extinguished while I had been outside making my own little fire. Ironic, they got rid of the lights, I made a new one. I laughed out loud again at my terrible attempt at a joke. I couldn't quite get over myself. Which was funnier, the crap quality of the joke or the joke itself? Ugh, so strenuous, the mind of a genius.

I sat at my desk and turned on my computer. There was one more thing I needed to do before I could dig into the heavenly prize that waited patiently before me. Windows didn't make a sound. It knew I was up to no good so it played a long, wanting me to enjoy the next three hours of space exploration. In reality I had muted the computer well in advance, one of my many preparations before my session had begun, but in that moment, I didn't quite remember that and lovingly stroked the side of the laptop and told it that it was the best.

The loading was done. I opened google chrome and went incognito. This was my guilty pleasure, nobody needed to know what I watched with a bowl of Coco Pops at this unGodly hour.

My fingers typed at what was an impressive pace for the condition I was in. Word for word, the search bar filled up with the one last missing piece of the perfect puzzle. *Snoop Dogg narrates Planet Earth*. I hit enter, clicked the first video and popped an earphone into each ear. I raised my spoon and soon my mouth was filled with what can only be described as a literal firework display of flavors. Sure, you may be thinking, it's literally nothing but chocolate rice pieces and milk, but that's where you'd be wrong. Well, I mean, you'd actually be right but in that moment, you would have been wrong, it's hard to explain but all you need to know is that the combination of Snoop Dogg commenting on wildlife footage and Coco Pops is something a lot more pleasuring than just chocolate rice and milk.

I finished my bowl as slowly as I could, cherishing it as long as possible before I detected the rice kernels becoming a little soggy. When that point came, I finished the bowl quickly and leaned back in my chair, stupid grin spread wildly across my face. This... was... heaven. Yep. There was no doubt about it in my mind anymore, I had successfully died and gone to heaven, and now faced an eternity of stoned devouring Coco Pops and binging on the Dogg himself.

I finished the last video I was watching and forced myself to close the window. I turned off my computer as I realized it was already well past midnight, and that in less than nine hours my

dad would be ringing the front doorbell. I sighed and stood up, went to the bathroom and brushed my teeth, giggled a few times when I noticed just how bloodshot my eyes had suddenly become (they were red the whole time, it was just the first time I was actually faced with my own reflection), and hopped into my bed. I say hopped because I actually jumped a little, instead of just gracefully lying down like I normally would. The extra addition of activity didn't really give me more pleasure though so I made a side note for any future times I would be stoned at Ryan's, to just get into the bed normally and avoid any extra efforts.

I lay quite still as I listened to music with the bedside lamp still on, waiting for the realm of blazed dreams to come and surround me. I wasn't really worried about not sleeping, as soon as I had lit that joint I knew I would sleep like a baby that night. But yet I was unable to stop a few of the unwanted thoughts as they clamored their way through my wall of intoxication.

Mainly, I was happy, plot twist I know, but no really, I was happy that I didn't have to go to school tomorrow. The last three days had been exhausting to say the least, but they had also been the fakest days of my life so far. I had smiled like an idiot whenever in the presence of other people, which happened to be a lot given that a school was unfittingly packed with other people. I couldn't bare the thought of awarding the victory to Evan, and I had felt their eyes on me constantly, in various classes but mostly during the breaks.

I really don't think that I'd been imagining it, but even if I had, there was no doubt in my mind that I was unequivocally happy about not having to fake any smiles or over the top happiness tomorrow. Well today, shit it was late, but I was just happy to leave.

I turned off the light and slowly closed my eyes. The darkness that now engulfed me, reminded me of the violence and rage that hid in some resembling dark corner deep within me. Over the last three days I had not only managed to fake a sense of happiness, but I had successfully managed to banish those two feelings of putrid hatred away from the shards of my broken soul which yearned to become whole again. I knew I had to forget in order for any healing to take place, so that's what I did, or tried to do, and forget. And yes, smoking marijuana to get rid of my troubles was not exactly the path chosen by most angels, but for the sleep that overcame me soon after these thoughts left my mind, it was worth every foreign invasion that had disrupted my lungs on that same evening.

I dreamed of Coco Pops and Snoop Dogg that night. There was still just one notification.

## Chapter 21: What happens in Bontebok stays in Bontebok

As I had expected, my father and brother (who had also flown to Cape Town from Dublin for the birthday party) rang the doorbell a little after 8:30. Luckily for me I had been awake already an hour in advance, worried that they'd have to wait for me while I packed and got ready if I woke up too late.

Since Stephan and Theresa were off at work, and Ryan happily sitting in double Math, I was the only one in the house and didn't even bother opening the gate. Not because I was rude, but because we were pressed for time and in a bit of a hurry to join the Schreiber festivities before the cake had been cut, metaphorically and literally. Instead I threw my rucksack over my shoulders, walked out the front door and closed it behind me, and greeted them where they waited, standing beside the silver Peugeot.

Though I didn't know it at the time, and had no hope of even guessing it, this car and I were to share a special relationship in the coming days, and when I think back on the first time I got in the backseat, I swear now that it whispered to me, teasingly, full of expectations, as though it were an old horse claiming a new rider for one last run.

"How's school bro?" asked my brother, turning in the front seat so we could speak face to face. Alex always had taken the whole 'bro' thing, a little too seriously for my liking. I mean, I get it, we're brothers, but I also don't say, 'hi there, brother'. Like the blood relationship is implied and shortening it doesn't make it any more OK. Even when 'bros' say it, it isn't OK, it just sounds too, how does one put it, *California*. Luckily, he wasn't a douche bag, so even though it sounded terribly obnoxious, it was easy to forgive him.

"Pretty good, not gonna lie. I seem to be smarter than half of these apes out here," I replied, immediately regretting my terminology and wanting to save myself by continuing, "apes as in just dumb people in general. Not because, you know, Africa and stuff. I just meant-"

"Yeah, yeah. We get it. You're a racist. Hopefully God will give you a second chance and forgive the odd white supremacy tendency here and there" interrupted Alex, cracking a huge grin to let me know that he was teasing me. I rolled my eyes and looked out the window but couldn't help myself as a smile tugged at my lips which my brother joyously noticed.

"And that's reason eighty-three why Maudi loves you, Arlo. It's because you're a racist" added my dad from the driver's seat, a comment which received a well-deserved chuckle from both me and my brother.

We talked a bit more about school, mainly the subjects and the teachers, not about the students (everyone seemed to have been forewarned of any possible triggers for another teary-eyed breakdown), and occasionally my dad would ask a question as well. My brother seemed to have been told very little about my exchange from either of my parents, so, we talked about that, and when we ran out of things to talk about, we changed topics and he told me about his recent trip to the United States, where he had met up with friends he had made at university in Dublin.

Some of his stories were quite hilarious, and I found myself often laughing out loud with my dad, who rarely shied away from adding an extra little comment to make it even funnier. The drive went by so quickly in the end, that it hardly felt like three hours had passed at all.

As we entered the game reserve we stopped telling stories. I mean to be fair, we'd have the next two days to tell each other stories, so upon actually entering the park, the next twenty minutes were spent furiously skimming the landscapes with wild eyes, trying to find animals that weren't Bontebok. As the name of the park, Bontebok National Park, would suggest, there were a shit load of Bontebok, literally everywhere, and my dad eventually offered a bounty as incentive for any animals spotted that were of a certain size, and *not* a Bontebok.

We arrived at the camp and immediately saw familiar faces. Not only familiar faces, but Schreiber faces. Family faces.

My great Aunt and Uncle, Brigitte and Bernd were there, as we could tell by their parked car outside one of the huts. My cousins Kyle and Lukas, the ones from grade 11 at Bergford, and their father, my Uncle Thomas were also already there, busy unpacking their weekend supplies from their car into their hut. A few more huts, each bearing the presence of some Schreiber, whether a second cousin, or more distant relative, this camp had been taken over, and was now the proud residence of the Schreiber family. Everyone we saw waved at us as we drove past them and continued driving a little way till we reached a relatively large hut which stood pretty much in the center of the camp and bustled with activity near where Maud's car was parked in the parking place.

We parked next to her car, and got out, not bothering to unpack anything without knowing which hut ours was. We were greeted by family members already within the hut, which must have been set up as the central hub of activity in the camp as people shuffled around, busying themselves by carrying furniture or food, or really anything at all outside and inside, preparing the venue for what would be a dinner serving 22 Schreiber's!

“Peter are you ill? Why aren’t you late? You’re always late! Should I call the park doctor?” asked my Aunt Katrin, my dad’s sister. Peter rolled his eyes and smiled.

“Ha, ha. I’m not late because my wife isn’t here! I thought it’d be obvious!” he replied, giving her a warm hug. My brother and I queued up for hugs as well. Katrin lived alone in the Drakensberg Mountains and worked as a volunteer in various charities and social projects. The woman was a bit of an enigma, basically meaning I rarely saw her. The last time before this might very well have been 2008. But it wasn’t because she didn’t care about us, on the contrary I think she cared quite a lot, but it was how she lived her life and we had all pretty much come to accept that as it was.

“My dudes, you guys look big. Taking steroids again huh?” she asked my brother and me. We both laughed and shook our heads, mumbling different replies to the obvious tease of a question.

Someone called as we finished our greeting, “Peter are you sick? You’re-”

“I’m not even late? Yes, good one mom. Katrin just made the same joke!”

Maud had come out of the hut approaching the four of us, calling to my dad with, no lie, the exact same joke as my aunt. I guess I should mention for the sake of clarity at this point, that my family did have a bit of a reputation of being, *not* so punctual to most family events. My dad blamed my mom. My mom blamed my dad. What can you do?

“If she just made the same joke she must have a clever mother. Oh wait,” she replied, “I am her mother!”

The five of us laughed together, we as the new arrivals approaching Maudi to greet the matriarch of the family. “I hope you guys are hungry because lunch is almost ready!” she exclaimed, pointing towards the kitchen where I now only picked up the scent of freshly roasted potatoes and barbecue-meat. T-bone steaks, Boerwors and Springbok. It was hard not to salivate and drool on Maudi’s shoulder as I hugged her, my stomach suddenly growling in agreement that, yes, I was indeed very hungry.

Before we entered the hut, however, to greet the rest of the family as well as join in for lunch, Maudi handed us the key to the hut we would be staying in and pointed us in its direction. As it turned out, it was the hut directly beside the central one. I guess being the son of the son of the VIP (it was Maudi’s birthday after all), did have its benefits after all!

We left the car parked exactly where it was and unloaded our own weekend supplies into our hut. Some of the things we then took straight to the central hut, as they were things we were delivering for dinner, amongst Maudi's presents which were piled high on a table in the living room of the central hut. There in wrapping paper lay a work of art. The book my father and I had created was printed without error a day before the deadline, and if you don't mind me saying, it looked bloody good. I don't know how my dad did it, although I can probably guess he just ended up working the night through so that it looked fresh and crisp, but when I held it in my hand for the first time, I was in sheer disbelief that this was a self-published product. I guess it just went to show that if the right care and love went into the work, anything self-published could look as good as my grandmother's birthday present. Aka, when I have to self-publish this bodacious collection of words on paper because no one wants to publish it, it'll look just as good in any event. Self-pity is also the name of my cologne which I put on when I cry alone.

We sat down at one of the long tables set up outside the hut, and hungrily attacked a plate of freshly grilled meat and vegetables. Maybe it should have felt a little weird, tearing pieces of flesh of what was surely a cousin of the Bontebok, I mean Springbok and Bontebok were both Bok, so they must have been related, but at that moment in time, as the hunger that had engulfed me so suddenly only moments before began to dissipate, I couldn't give anything even close to a rat's ass.

My cousins arrived from their hut and joined us, careful to avoid the meat and all its glory. For some cruel reason, my aunt and uncle had decided to rear their children as vegetarians, which in my eyes was nearly the same as raising two psychopaths. The conversation was cheery and warm as we talked about school, concentrating on grade 11 and their friends and their teachers. My brother then in turn told them about his travels, and though I had heard the stories only an hour or two before, I wouldn't have wished for anything different from lunch with my family in that exact moment.

After our lunch together, we retired to our various huts, given that it was already 13:30 we were even a bit late for an afternoon nap, but being a family of strict to tradition Germans, we simply couldn't miss out on the usual formalities, and were ordered to return to the central hut no later than 18:00. Since I'd never really gotten into the whole afternoon nap kind of vibe, as in if I took an afternoon nap I knew I wouldn't be able to sleep well in the evening, I took out some homework I had due the next week and tore through trigonometric functions while listening to

what I guess you could call, happy music. I smiled as I remembered that I was missing the first Friday to serve my six hours of well-deserved detention. The most you could do in one sitting was three hours, so the thought of Ms. Cliffords realizing that the two weeks she had given me would have to turn into three was enough for me to feel if even only slightly victorious. It was a less important battle, but at least I'd won it. Sometimes taking the lowballs wasn't even that bad, you just had to play them off like they'd actually required some effort.

At about 17:30, I finished the last two problems I was doing, I had long since finished my homework and moved onto problems that would be due at a later point the next week, and started getting changed into more formal clothing for the evening's festivities. Though I didn't quite settle for a suit and tie given that I didn't want to look like a pompous vegetarian (sorry Kyle & Lukas), I did put on a nice checkered shirt and a pair of long black pants. With a rather hefty sigh, I also discarded my flipflops and grudgingly fitted two pointy suit shoes on my feet. After a look in the mirror I decided that I had cleaned up pretty well and went into the living room of our own hut to join my dad and brother.

"Well you look homeless" joked my brother. Or at least I guess it was meant as a joke, given that it wasn't that funny I'm still not really sure how he thought it could have been funny. I laughed though, mainly just to please him and nodded my head because I was lost for words.

"Homeless doesn't really make sense. He does look like he owns a shifty funeral home though, you know like the kind of funeral director who enjoys his job way too much. He doesn't just see dead people, he enjoys being with them" added my father. Now that was funny. Creepy, yes, but a lot funnier than homeless.

"And you look like a dead person who I neglected to freshen up" I replied smugly, beckoning to my father's Che Guevara t-shirt tucked half into some khaki shorts. Unlike my brother and me, he had not abandoned his flipflops. OK fine, they weren't flipflops, they were Crocs, but I honestly couldn't tell which were less appropriate to wear to your mothers 85<sup>th</sup> birthday party.

My father laughed and nodded his head in agreement. "This is true. Although dead people are probably dressed a little better" he said, smiling in appreciation. He didn't really do fancy, but it was borderline acceptable given that he also didn't care what other people thought.

The three of us exited our hut looking like a very gone wrong version of the Brady bunch and headed to the central hut. We greeted the rest of the family, those we hadn't seen before the

definitive afternoon nap time, and basically had the same conversation, over and over again. Here's a template of that conversation, though if you've ever been to a family reunion, you can probably guess the general gist of it.

"So how have you been since the last time we saw each other, Arlo? How's school? Are you still acting? How's your mother?" asks second cousin Julius in a series of quickly fired remarks.

"Oh, you know, I'm doing pretty well! School's been great, I'm still top of the class in Math and I'm really looking forward to doing Computer Science as an elective next year! Mom's great, she's really sad she couldn't make it over this year, but school's been pretty hectic for her, getting settled into the new job and all!" I reply to second cousin so and so, trying to make sure I actually answered all his questions. The problem with a template is that when it changes ever so slightly, you might be caught a little unaware.

"So how have you been since the last time we saw each other, Arlo? How's school? I was so sorry to hear about your dog passing away! He was such a friendly muppet!" asks great uncle Hermann, offering his condolences. I don't listen, I'm on autopilot.

"Oh, you know, I'm doing pretty well! School's been great, and I'm still the best in Math of my class. I'm really looking forward to doing Computer Science next year as an elective, it should be super interesting! Mom's great!" I reply, fully unaware about the grievances offered for my supposed dead dog. Don't get me wrong, I love my family and I love talking with all of them, but until you've bypassed these initial conversations, it's all a bit, or rather a bit too much of a repetitive nature for me. Some people like my dad, loved telling stories over and over again. I for one, did not. Also, even if I had picked up on the part about the dog, I don't even have a dog, or haven't had one in ten years, so I'm pretty sure uncle so and so had just started drinking way before the rest of us!

After the repetitions had been served, the real conversations started, my favorite topics as usual being united states politics, given that I attended a US international school in Berlin, and anything related to upcoming technologies. My favorite subtopic of technology being Bitcoin, naturally, as I furiously tried to persuade some of the most conservative investors of my family to buy into some digital currency that wasn't backed by a government or even gold. Those conversations were probably the funniest.

“So, you’re telling me this *butt*-coin, only exists on the internet?” asked my great uncle Bernd, a madly successful, but now retired businessman.

“Well no, not directly on the internet. It exists on a network like the internet. A network that relays all transactions that have ever taken place.” I replied, ready to spend the entirety of the evening discussing this.

“So, if the network goes down, the butt-coins evaporate. So, they’re not actually real?” he asks in return.

“Well it’s as real as a piece of paper reflecting a value of currency. Just because it’s digital doesn’t mean it isn’t real.”

“Yes, but if the butt-network goes down, then everything is gone. Gold can’t just be gone. But this *butt* thing, it can disappear. If there’s no regulation, then it’s basically like me saying an acorn is worth 200\$. A butt-acorn, to serve as an accurate example.”

Keep in mind that this was November 2014, not whatever time it is you’re reading this now. Back then, this was exactly how bitcoin, or rather butt-coin, was viewed. The conversation would go on like this, back and forth for at least a few minutes, the end only approaching when the relative, my victim of the moment, would agree to look into it and watch it over time. I doubt anyone did it. Otherwise the Schreiber’s would own a couple of castles by now. And present Arlo can unfortunately tell you, those castles never happened. A butt-coin castle will have to remain in my dreams.

At about 19:00, we started drinking. It was only a champagne reception, something to quench the thirst of conversing, but once the Schreiber family had started to drink, it was destined to be a long and foggy evening. Maybe I should clarify some things, like the fact that were not a family of alcoholics, despite me having made it sound very much like that indeed. On the contrary the most of us, and I do mean most as I don’t want to generalize, were actually quite the responsible drinkers. Usually. A family event was something else entirely, and though I’d never been quite old enough to partake at the past events, observing my family members had always offered quite enough insight. How did we drink, you may ask yourself? Well, the singing usually started an hour after the first drink, and the dirty jokes followed soon thereafter, measurably about an hour and a half after the first drink.

Though my dad watched me with a careful eye, as aforementioned he was not a fan of alcohol in the least and rarely ever drank alcohol even at family events, I managed to drink three

glasses of champagne before it was taken away. Not because I was trying to get drunk, God no, after my last two experiences being too intoxicated for anything practical, I had no desire whatsoever in getting pissed at a family event. But the champagne was good, I won't pretend like I knew the brand, I won't rattle off some fancy name that sounded like some precious metal, because truthfully, I had no idea what I was drinking. But it tasted good and that was encouragement enough. Probably Gucci Champagne, but maybe it was Gosha.

And that was my first mistake of the evening. I wasn't embarrassing, that's not why it was a mistake, by God most of the Schreiber's had taken at least a glass or two, but it was a mistake in the sense that... Oh who am I kidding, you'll see for yourself later in the evening.

I began noticing that I was certainly tipsy, not so tipsy that it would be apparent to those around me, but tipsy enough to feel cloudy and perhaps a little more courageous than I usually would. I was speaking with my cousins and my brother yet again, commenting on how drunk the adults would be later in the evening, probably as a defense mechanism against my acknowledgement of my own intoxication. It was mostly chit-chat, though I did put in a lot of effort to banter with the boys harder than usual.

"What's the difference between a rapist and a vegetarian?" I asked, not quite sure how I would finish the joke. Tipsy Arlo was clearly certain he had it covered though, so I left the rest up to my dissociated self.

"I don't know" replied Kyle.

"Well at least the rapist eats meat."

There was silence. It wasn't the first vegetarian jab I'd made at the two this evening. In fact, it was one of the many, but this one, landed as well as all the others combined. My brother roared out loud whipping his head backwards. Though the two tried not to laugh, they struggled immensely and followed in tow, shaking their heads at how disgusting and immature it was. I didn't care. In the heat of the moment it was good, what can I say. The train was right outside Banterburry.

"That's disgusting, Arlo. You do know you're implying that all vegetarians are rapists?" asked Lukas. I turned my head and narrowed my eyes.

"I was hoping it wouldn't be an implication. All vegetarians *are* rapists."

This amounted to a fresh bout of laughter. I was honestly surprised at some of the things I was saying, and though I couldn't quite blame it entirely on the alcohol, I mean I was conscious

and aware enough to fully realize what I was saying as I said it, but they came from a seemingly dark part of me. Better out than in. I was embracing the type of humor that started oozing out of you when you threw away the filter. It was awesome.

“Why did John Dahmer murder so many young boys?” I asked.

“Because he was a vegetarian?” responded Kyle, questioningly.

“No, that’s stupid. It was because he was raised a vegetarian and ended up crazy hungry for the meat” I replied. Yes, it was almost the same joke, it alluded to the same thing, but still, it was dirtier and grittier, and the laughter from my audience was enough to cement the feeling that I had struck gold.

“I’m so glad we’re this entertaining for you Arlo” said Lukas, shaking his head in disbelief.  
“Peter has been teaching you some messed up jokes!”

I was about to respond to explain that these were original jokes, not copied over from my genius dad, but then a ringing sounded out from where my grandmother was standing with a group of family friends. She was gently knocking a knife against her wine glass, ordering the attention of the crowd towards her. The conversations gradually died out over the next few seconds as heads turned in respectful concentration.

“I want to thank all of you for coming here tonight. Some of you travelled from all over the world, Tanja from New York, Peter and his boys from Berlin, I myself from Noordhoek Manor, which also wasn’t the shortest drive!” There were some lowly chuckles as she paused to look at the crowd.

“Since the drinking has already begun, the dinner buffet will be opened in just a few moments. So, while we’re all here together, let us remember those who can’t be with us today, and enjoy the times that have been, and will be. Family is quite possibly the most important thing in the world, so let us celebrate here together, for the sake of family and loved ones!” She raised her glass and waited patiently as champagne glasses were filled up and reflected in the air.

“Prost” called Maudi.

“Prost” we shouted in reply, all taking a sip at the same time.

And so, the dinner buffet was opened, plates scraped against each other, conversations started up and continued from where they had left off, and very quickly the standing Schreiber’s of the champagne reception became the sitting Schreiber’s of the dinner buffet. Glasses of wine were poured generously, I myself opted for a glass of white wine, not because I understood the

difference, but because the white was chilled, and why would anyone drink room temperature alcohol?

The dinner was like the lunch we had had earlier. Lots of grilled meat and vegetables, with the addition of some traditional German dishes such as potato salad and Bratwurst. I stayed with the same company, my cousin and my brothers, but also chatted with the other family members sitting in our vicinity.

Though I'd like to say that the food settling in my stomach made a huge difference, and that I was feeling fully sober again, I don't want to lie. The wine was in fact nullifying the food, even more likely was that it was in fact adding and magnifying the effects of the third and fourth glass of champagne, but as I grew increasingly drunk, I dare say that I didn't really give a shit. My relatives didn't notice, probably because they were doing their fair share of drinking as well, but I wasn't drinking to get drunk. I really wasn't. I don't think any of us were, even if that is what I've made it sound like. We were drinking because the wine complimented the food. And those drinking beers were drinking them because they complimented their already present beer bellies. It's not like we had a drinking problem! We really didn't have a drinking problem. Did we have a drinking problem?

After the dinner, Maudi invited us inside the hut, into the living room so that we could open the presents. The singing had already started, no other than Hermann was singing a very dodgy rendition of, *So ein Tag, so wunderschön wie Heute*, and somehow managed to motivate my other two great uncles to join in with what I'm guessing were attempts at a harmonization. After being shushed several times by various slightly soberer relatives, they obliged and left the room relatively silent for Maudi to start unwrapping her presents.

There were a lot of presents to go through, so I won't bore you with the details, but it was interesting to see that the number of presents received in relation to age, seemed to be closely proportionate to a bell curve. The younger one was, the more presents it was that one received. The number would decrease up to a certain age, when people obviously felt like you needed more happiness in your life, and hence more than things. I guess it made sense, 85 years old was not something to be scoffed at, but I did wonder how gifting a spatula (of which I'm sure Maudi must have had a literal cupboard full by now), would amount in a noticeable increase in happiness. Regardless of my thoughts, Maudi was delighted with each gift that she opened, even when she

opened the second Spatula and felt obliged to make a joke about how she could now wield two spatulas and double her efficiency.

The time came for her to open our present, and having drunk another glass of wine during the previous presents I whistled loudly and clapped like a mad man. No one reacted negatively. Maybe that's why I didn't listen to my liver. I'll blame it on the people around me.

The paper fell way and she held our creation, careful not to smudge the cover. She read the title out loud and smiled warmly.

"85 reasons why we love Maudi Maus. A book by reasons one, two and three why Maudi Maus loves the world (Peter, Andrea, Arlo and Alex)." She got up and hugged the three of us, kissing us on the cheek. I'm not saying that she wasn't genuinely happy about the two spatulas, but I guess my grandmother had always had a special place in her heart for DIY gifts. Or maybe DIY gifts was the wrong classification, rather gifts that involved one of the most precious ingredients of all. Time. And we had certainly bled some time into this.

We read a few of the reasons out loud for the crowd, me choosing the funniest ones and my dad choosing the most sentimental. I won't deny that at this point the slurring had begun. It wasn't strong, I doubt anyone really noticed it, but after reading the last reason twice, I laughed awkwardly and closed the book, saying something like "If you want to read the rest, you'll just have to buy it!"

I trudged towards the bar as my grandmother continued unpacking, filling my empty glass with some more wine. It lasted me the remainder of her stack of presents, and once it was empty I made the responsible decision to not drink any more alcohol, deciding that swaying on the spot was not how I wanted the rest of the evening to go. The desert buffet was opened shortly thereafter, and my, was I happy to take my coke and a bowl of ice cream to sit outside in the now dark dining area. Kyle and Lukas joined me, my brother was off somewhere with my other cousin Hannah, and I was glad to see that they had also moved on to drinking coke. Their eyes weren't quite as bleary as mine, I guess that responsibility does seem to come with age, but they definitely weren't sober either.

Like a pair of drunken baboons, we started talking about 'manly' things, women and sports, though the irony being that not one of us three had any real interest in sports apart from the occasional game of FIFA, nor were we exactly womanizers to be frank.

"Margot Robbie is so hot" said Kyle. We shook our heads in agreement.

“Man, Cara Delavigne is also pretty smoking! I’d definitely hook up with her” said Lukas. More unified nods.

“I bet I could bang them” I exclaimed, shrugging it off like it was obvious.

“Yeah right, they’re waaay too hot man. Kak dude, I don’t even think Leonardo di Caprio could bang *them*!” refuted Lukas. I thought it over but shook my head.

The outside light suddenly turned on, blinding us all. My grandmother waltzed out, four empty glasses in the one hand and a bottle of Amarula in the other. I could have put two and two together, I mean it definitely wasn’t hard to do. There were four glasses, and now four people. But I just couldn’t wrap my head around my grandmother coming out here to drink one with the boys. I mean we were all of appropriate age, the twins were almost 18 and I had been allowed to drink in Germany since earlier this year, but it was still weird. I guess it’s only something you can truly understand when your own grandmother comes to drink with you and your cousins.

“What are you three gossiping about?” she asked. Unlike many of my other relatives, Maudi held a strong composure. She did not seem intoxicated in the slightest, not to say that she hadn’t been drinking, from what I’d seen she’d certainly been holding her own, but for some reason she was just far better at playing it off than the rest of us.

“Girls and sports” I replied truthfully, receiving a chuckle from Maudi.

“Makes me think of your grandfather and his brothers. They would have been talking about the same things in your age, right around the time when he met me! And to think that nothing’s changed, you still probably don’t have a clue about the girls!” she said smiling, provoking a blush from all three of us.

“Well while we’re all here we might as well drink to Kurt! He did learn to understand me as the years went on, so I guess you guys shouldn’t worry too much. If you can learn to love and love till the very end, then you’ve pretty much gotten everything one can ask for.” She filled the four glasses and EMPTIED the bottle. I shit you not, it was the same 0.75l bottle, the same one I had finished myself a few weeks ago, but now I was storming drunk already. I was gone, and I mean gone, but I didn’t want to disappoint her, so I raised my glass alongside my cousins who looked equally worried as the glasses clanked together.

I should clarify that my grandmother would not have been mad if I had refused to drink the Amarula. In fact, she would have probably respected it a lot more than what would happen later, but in that moment, it just felt like a bonding experience that had to be followed through.

The familiar creamy vanilla liquid warmed my throat. Thank God it was nice and cold, and it actually ended up going really well together with the ice cream. But getting it down wasn't the problem. In fact, the four of us drank down the glasses rather quickly while sharing stories about girls (I said nothing about Emily of course), and my grandmother telling us stories about our grandfather. But there was still alcohol present in the drink, that much was clear as the four of us followed in Hermann's footsteps, mastering together our own rendition of *So ein Tag, so wunderschön wie Heute*.

I sat there with them for about another ten minutes before the dizziness got too much. I tried to force myself to stay, but I couldn't, I needed a breath of fresh air or something, which was awful in every sense of the word, given that I was already outside surrounded by fresh air! I stood by the railing and tried to focus my vision on anything in the darkness. My grandmother asked me if I was OK and I nodded back trying to mumble something. I heard someone else joining my cousins outside, but I couldn't turn my head for fear of overwhelming myself.

"Has Arlo drunk a little too much?" bellowed a voice which I now recall belonging to my great uncle Hermann. I shook my head, obviously attempting and miserably failing to lie, which resulted in a big laugh escaping my great uncle's mouth as he slapped me twice on the middle of my back.

I'd rather pretend that the next part didn't happen, but I am trying to stick to the story, whether it's a darkness I don't like to recall, or a gruesome and unflattering image of myself, I'll be true and tell it. And so, I vomited a landslide of food and alcohol, over the railing into the darkness. The slaps had pushed me over the edge and as the smell of my own vomit invaded my nostrils, I wretched some more and then some more. My great uncle continued laughing, he still won't admit it to this day even though I've tried to explain that I would have also laughed in the same situation, and then he slapped me a few more times on the back no doubt trying to help me expel the toxins.

The headache didn't wait. It started before I'd even finished vomiting. It was a strange kind of headache, given that everything around me was as dizzy as a children's carousel, it just felt like an odd sensation to have both the dizziness and the headache going on at the same time. I couldn't talk, I could barely move apart from the on and off motion of my head spasming forwards to puke a little more. I thought about my poor grandmother having to witness my irresponsible drinking. I

must have looked like a bloody disgrace. The Schreiber's might drink a lot at festivities, but they certainly didn't drink to get sick at the end of the night.

What happened over the course of the next few minutes, I still don't really remember to this day. It's not even like I have a hazy recollection of it, but someone, I'm assuming it was Kyle and Lukas, carried me arm in arm towards my hut, leaving behind a trail of puke leading to the central hut. Obviously, they had decided that there was nothing really that could be done for me, but to ship me off into my bathroom, and lie me down on the floor with an easy access to the toilet bowl. They waited with me for a while there. I'd be lying if I said I knew how long it was, I was still pretty much blacked out at this point, but at some point, I must have told them to go back to the party, because I seemed to be arguing (if one could call it that) with them that I would be fine if I had the toilet.

So, they left, leaving me a glass of water and putting a blanket over me in case I got cold. And once I had fully acknowledged that I was now truly alone apart from a toilet bowl of my own vomit, I no longer had the energy or the persistence to keep the thoughts that I had fended off so well for the entire evening at bay. I just let them course through me, ripping things down like a hurricane hitting a metropolitan city. I groaned. I groaned because yes, I was feeling like absolute and utter horseshit, but I also groaned because the darkness that had claimed my mindset once again, was far truer than the apparition I had forced myself to believe in the past few days. And that hurt considerably.

I thought about Evan and the gang, and what they would be doing now and why they had decided to do what they had done? What had *I* done, to provoke such hostile behavior, was I really at fault or had the universe played the cruellest trick on me simply because it could? I didn't understand, I couldn't understand, and so I groaned, and I groaned, in hopes that my groans would keep the flows away. But I was naïve to think that that would work.

For when the thoughts altered their course and led me to another part of my brain, one section that was probably directly connected to my heart and soul, I wept and I wept even though the movement forced me to puke more. She was beautiful, still, like I'd actually believed that she couldn't be, ha, but yet this unchanging crystalized beauty screamed at me and asked me why. And I couldn't respond. What does one tell the most angelic and unapologetically beautiful girl in the world when she asks why? Especially when you don't even have an answer. Would you lie? No, you wouldn't. You'd be too damn worried that she'd see through the lie and take personal offense,

so you'd just say nothing, and watch her disappear. Cowardly, isn't it, human nature, but it wasn't the cowardice that destroyed me, but rather the thought of me never being able to prove the preconceptions of cowardice *wrong*.

I lay there for what must have been an hour, vomiting and crying till both those bodily functions were overly exhausted. If you've ever puked from drinking too much, then you'll know that you're in serious shit when you've puked out everything that was in your stomach in the first place and spent the rest of the time retching because the nausea refused to take its leave.

I did make it into my bed at some point in the evening though, since that was where I ended up in the morning. But the thoughts that I had allowed back into my mind, accompanied me and tortured me throughout the night until I finally fell asleep. And she was there in my dreams too, of course she was everywhere, all the time, but even in my dream I could not resolve the problem I was facing. I couldn't even understand it and the combination of both those realities was something that scarred me to this day. Even when I finally did figure out what happened, I couldn't shake the feeling that the aftermath had been branded into the blank space left by the absence of my soul.

That evening in Bontebok National Park was about as bad as that last day of my exchange when I still saw her, but when I look back at it, I'm glad the night happened, because the utter feeling of shit, and the not knowing and the not being able to walk properly, all amounted to what I like to call the final straw.

I fell asleep. It was dark and cold in the African bush. There was still just one notification.

## Chapter 22: And that my friends, is how you ride a horse

I was blind. I had also definitely been shot in the head, at least a few times. And there was a hole in my stomach, that was clear too. A big fat hole that festered with infection. I opened my eyes. No OK, I squinted my eyes because even the little light that poured through a break in my blinds, was enough to start the high maintenance power drill that now seemed to have taken residence inside my head.

I groaned, or rather I made a noise that could be defined as perhaps a twice removed cousin of the groan because shortly after I'd opened my mouth I also felt a gagging sensation. I covered my hand over my mouth and barely managed to ignore the searing pain behind my eyes as I sprinted for the bathroom. My ears prickled as the water I had barely managed to drink late last night splashed into the toilet bowl. I wanted to move, get away from the stench of my own vomit, but some part of me knew, that moving would only lead to further bodily expulsion. So, I just sat there for a while, hugging the toilet bowl for protection and filling myself with utter regret for drinking so much. If you've had a hangover as bad as this one before, you'll know how it goes. The alcohol makes you hate yourself, but not quite enough to never drink again.

And then the laughter came. Two distinctly different types of laughter to be more precise, but the noises were indistinguishably laughter. I carefully turned my head behind me, still only squinting at the harsh lights that seemed to come from everywhere.

"Did someone have a little too much to drink last night?" asked my brother, ruffling my hair before retracting his hand with a wary, slightly disgusted look on his face. He had just found out, the hard way, that I hadn't been nearly as clean and well targeted the night before. Even if the vomit in my hair wasn't wet anymore, it was still vomit. Ha. Serves you right for laughing.

My brother and father were standing in the doorway to the kitchen, still laughing as I occasionally turned my head back to the toilet bowl to continue my purge. They didn't only look a lot better off than me, in fact they looked like two men who hadn't touched a drop of alcohol in weeks. And maybe for my dad this was true, but my brother had been drinking with me the night before. Tolerance bla this, tolerance bla that, what kind of cruel world was this that he was completely free from punishment?

"Why you not hungover" I asked him, taking slow breaths between each word. This provoked a further rally of boisterous laughter, and behind my eyelids I simply rolled my eyes.

“Well because I obviously didn’t drink as much as you did. And because of tolerance –” started my brother. I knew he’d say it, he had to say it. Fucking tolerance.

“Fuck your tolerance that’s bullshit!” I exclaimed, taking my head out of the toilet bowl for the last time that morning. I looked him dead in the eyes, yes still squinting but I gave it a good effort. My brother only laughed more, but my dad was less impressed.

“Hey, language. Come on. I have zero sympathy for people who drink too much. Your liver will thank you later for this abomination!” I should have expected that, it was well deserved after all. I didn’t curse in front of my parents, it’s unbecoming to put it simply.. But let me promise you, when you’re sitting less than thirty centimeters away from a toilet bowl filled with your own puke, and you’re still slightly tipsy from the unmeasurable amounts of alcohol still poisoning your system, in that scenario, you just don’t give a shit, and freedom of language makes it easier to express that there are major construction works going on in your brain.

I groaned and slowly stood up. My brother handed me a tall glass of water, though it looked a bit dirtier than the clear water we usually got in Cape Town. Probably just bush water or whatever, but hey, it was still water. I take a sip and was met with an immediate cooling sensation that scrubbed and rinsed the remaining bile down my throat.

“Why is this bitter?” I asked. The water was bitter. No water tasted bitter, did it?

“Ibuprofen. You have two hours to feel better again, after that we’re going for a drive. And you better be ready to drive by then” replies my dad. “Just because you’re feeling like kak doesn’t mean you’re excused from family activities. I should actually force you to come with on the morning hike, but I don’t feel like you throwing up in front of everyone again.”

Just for clarification, my dad had been laughing earlier. And I mean it must have been funny, that’s undeniable, but after the initial hilarity of the situation, I heard something else present in his voice. The bitter tone of disappointment, appropriately served with my bitter tasting water.

“OK, then I’ll go back to bed now and sleep a little more. Wake me up half an hour before we leave, please” I replied shamefully. My brother laughed again as I walked past them and back into my bedroom. I lay down on my bed and smiled due to a lack of spinning walls. I closed my eyes and fell almost immediately into what would be a sedated sleep. 800mg of Ibuprofen is not really the smartest thing to take after a night of heavy drinking, but I can tell you now that it will eliminate most of the hangover, so situationally it’s perfectly acceptable. Isn’t that how crack-addicts justify their addictions? Ugh, it was probably a lot more complex than that.

“You should be glad I didn’t wake you up with a Vuvuzela!” shouted my dad from outside my room. I shuddered at the thought and fell asleep.

.....

Doot doot doo dooo doot, doot doot doo dooo doot! My eyes fluttered wildly as I was awakened by the sound of a trumpet. Doot doot doo dooo doot, doot doot doo dooo doot! I looked toward my doorway, looking for some kind of explanation for this unruly activity. A green Vuvuzela was attached to my father’s mouth and he was furiously blowing into it. I jumped out of the bed and chased towards him, wanting to tear the damned thing away from him. He retreated backwards, pleased with his achievement and still letting rip the occasional doot doo. I returned to my room and then only realized how good I was feeling. Seriously, I felt like a king. Or well, in contrast to how I felt when I had first woken up, I was feeling like royalty. There was still a slight headache and I was crazily tired, but my eyes seemed to have no trouble taking in the natural lighting around me, which was nice given that I didn’t have to squint anymore.

I slowly started dressing myself, shorts and a t-shirt, before realizing a quick shower would maybe not be the worst idea. Again, there was puke in my hair, dried, nice and crusty, there was probably puke on my hands, and to just lower the chance of any puke remaining anywhere on or in my body, a shower seemed like the best course of action.

I hopped in, enjoying the lukewarm water, hurriedly scrubbing and cleaning every nook and cranny as my brother reminded me that we only had limited time left. I finished up, got dressed for a second time and strolled towards the front of the cabin where I assumed my brother and father would be waiting for me. And there they were, dressed in equally casual clothing and flip-flops, but apparently something about my appearance was subject to new laughter.

“You don’t really think you’re going to be driving in flip-flops, do you?” asked my dad, shaking his head. I didn’t understand. My face showed it too, utter bewilderment. As aforementioned, *they* were wearing flip-flops.

“So, what’s wrong with my flip-flops, that isn’t wrong with *your* flip-flops?” I asked. They laughed again.

“What did you think I meant when I said you should be ready to drive?” asked my dad. “You can’t drive with flip-flops, especially not the first time”.

The truth dawned on me, suddenly and all at once. We weren't going on a drive, or well, we were, but it was more than that. I was supposed to drive. For the first time. With the worst hangover of my young life.

"You can't be serious?" I asked.

"Of course I'm serious, you're the one who said you wanted to learn how to drive. So, here's your chance, and you're taking it" replied my dad.

I shook my head in bewilderment. I should be excited, any other day and I would have been jumping around about to blow a fuse, but on this day, I was just so tired, I didn't want to do anything, especially learn how to drive.

"Isn't it counterintuitive or whatever, though? Learning to drive hungover, I mean I'll probably forget everything anyways, am I right?" I asked, false hope brimming to escape and help me change my father's mind.

"Don't be stupid, if you can drive hungover, then you can drive in a lot of worse and more realistic situations. Think of it as stress training, or something like that. You'll do fine. Just get some proper shoes on." He replied smugly. I was beginning to realize that he was using the situation as an opportunity to punish me for my reckless drinking. I did need to learn how to drive, so it wouldn't be in vain, but it was certainly a lot more enjoyable for him to see me squirm at the very thought of getting behind the wheel.

I raced inside and put on my shoes, then went back outside. My brother and father were waiting for me beside the car, beckoning for me to get into the driver's side. I opened the door and got in, my father taking the passenger's side and my brother sitting in the middle in the back. I gingerly placed my hands on the wheel, looking nervously at my father.

"Now what?" I asked.

"Drive. You aren't going to learn anything by standing here all day!"

I analyzed his expression, he wasn't kidding. He just wanted me to drive, so I thought long and hard to find any relevant pieces of information about driving a car. I knew there was a clutch, for starting the car and changing the gears and stuff. Accelerator and brake too, obviously, and then the thing to change the gears, stick shift I think. But shit, how did these things even work together? I couldn't just start the car and accelerate, right? Maybe, only one way to find out.

The key turned in the ignition, and the engine sprang to life, the buzzing and humming breathing through me. I pushed my foot down on what I thought to be the accelerator and was met

with a violent jerking motion of the car which turned off the engine. So, no Arlo, you can't just start the car and accelerate, after all that would be far too easy.

I turned the key again, once again being filled with the buzzing sensation which I now observed did not result entirely from the car itself, but also from within my stomach, like butterflies but with less sexual electricity involved. I looked at the pedals beside my feet, frozen innocently in anticipation. I pushed the left most pedal down, what I thought to be the clutch, and held my foot on it. I remember watching my mom a few times as she had started the car, and though she did it ten times as quick as I was attempting to now, she always pushed the clutch down and left it down. Then the stick shift, I made sure it was in first gear, and then I tried to accelerate. We jerked forward again as the engine turned off. I groaned as my father and brother laughed, bemused.

I continued experimenting with a different order for the steps I had somewhat come to believe were half way correct, and eventually learned that the clutch had to be pushed down before igniting the engine. From the corner of my eye I could see my father smile, not in mockery, but in praise as I pieced the process together little by little. After half an hour sitting in front of the wheel, with zero help from my brother or my father, I managed to start the car and accelerate.

Clutch down, engine on, push gear into first, slowly raise clutch as you push down on the acceleration, and boom, drive. That's how easy it should be. I continued stalling for the next half an hour, on and off, making slow but necessary progress. After my first successful attempt of driving, my father had started pitching in with comments every now and then, he still wanted me to figure most of the things out by myself, but he did give me tips.

And so, here I was, about an hour after getting behind the wheel, cruising warily down the dirt roads of Bontebok National Park. My dad even allowed me turn on the radio quietly, admitting that I had shown a relative dedication to staying completely focused on the driving, free of any distractions.

“He’s doing better than I did the first time you took me driving” said my brother to my dad. My dad laughed at this and turned his head to respond.

“Well it took you the first half an hour till you realized there was a clutch. After that it all went quickly, but I mean the clutch is basically the corner piece of the puzzle. Without it, you’ll never reach the finish line, nor will you even start the race!” I grinned smugly at this. Damn straight I was a quick learner, and even in the post stage of the morning hangover, I was picking up the

motions quickly. And yeah, clutch and puzzle and stuff. I knew that lingo now. I was a driver. Come at me speed limits and other signs that indicate important things, I'm ready for you now.

Yeah so as you can probably guess, it didn't end up being so great that I was overly confident. In fact, it led to what can probably, legally by defined as a disaster of almost epic proportions. But before that happened we just continued cruising.

The longer I was able to drive without stalling, the louder my dad would turn up the music, and soon with the windows down, wind in my hair, the three of us were jamming to Namibian marimba music while enjoying the landscapes and the occasional animals we saw. Actually, animals would be wrong, it was all just bloody bontebok, though to be honest we were probably scaring away the majority of the animals with our music, but still it was nice, and for me I wished the moment would never end. I thought back to how nervous I had been in the morning and was glad my father had wanted to punish my drinking. Sometimes the things that are forced can turn out to be great, it's funny how that works in the world.

And then the turn came, the road forked slightly to the left, and instead of slowing down, I accelerated in my confident state. Of course I could take the turn, I'd taken seven or eight turns just like it earlier on, going just as fast, so why shouldn't I be able to take this one now too. The marimba music seemed to speed up, in line with my foot on the accelerator.

"Take it easy, Arlo. Slower is always better for turns" warned my dad. That sounds exactly like something my dad would say. The slower the better? Driving wasn't knitting, there was no point in going slowly, he just didn't want me to overstep. Well I'd show him that faster was better, so I pushed down the accelerator just a little more and sped into the turn.

Mother... fucking... bontebok. He was standing there, in the middle of the road, grazing on some lone tuft of grass, and because of the bushes on the side of the road, he'd managed to stay hidden as I'd approached the turn. I'd like to say that I was manly, and that I yelled out and didn't scream out like a little girl. But again, I'm trying to be honest, so yes, I screamed like twenty-two little girls in a choir, as I furiously turned the wheel to the right to avoid hitting the blasted creature. The car drifted for a short moment and then proceeded to flip on its side. As my body flung ferociously to the side, I have never been so happy about wearing my seatbelt. In fact, I was happy that neither my brother or my father had trusted me enough on my first drive to drive without a seatbelt. Without the seatbelts, we might have died. I'll put it as simply as that, mainly because I don't like thinking back on it with too much detail. I could lull about and consider the many ways

our necks would have cracked, or how our brains would have exploded outwards upon impact with the roof. No, I don't do that, because my God am I happy that we had seatbelts on.

The car flipped one last time, onto the roof, and left us dangling in the air suspended by our seatbelts. There would be cuts and bruises, I knew that was a certainty as adrenaline rushed and pumped through me. I undid the seatbelt carefully, and crashed to the roof which now acted as the floor. My dad's face was white, ghostlike, so was my brother's. I mean mine was probably the same color, but I didn't think about that as I moved to undo my father's seatbelt and then my brother's. They were speechless as I moved, and they said nothing even as we clambered out the doors in complete and utter shock. The three of us now stood there, staring silently at what seemed almost to be a freak of nature, an upside-down car.

I turned my head to face the culprit. The Bontebok, had taken flight, no doubt afraid I was going to try and make a steak from his hide. The fucker had nearly killed the three of us and here I was standing alone, the only one to take the blame.

"I'm so sorry dad, I'm really really sorry, I'll pay what I can, I'm really really sorry, I didn't think there'd be something on the road –" I started to apologize, tears now running down my face. My dad took me by the shoulders and forced me into a bearhug of an embrace. His eyes were not angry, they were not disappointed, they were simply relieved. My brother joined the hug.

"The insurance will cover it, don't worry. The main thing is we're OK. The main thing is we're OK" said my dad softly. He repeated this a few times, and I started to see the truth of it. It was definitely my fault, I took the turn too fast, even without the Bontebok it could have gone badly, but the main thing really was that we were OK.

Even though I saw the truth of this, it didn't change the power of guilt eating away inside of me. It didn't matter that it was my first time driving, or that I couldn't have known better or that anyone could have made the same mistake. It's funny how guilt works you see, because the main thing it feeds off is that you are the independent variable. You can be replaced by anyone or anything, but the fact still remains that you caused the event that leads to the guilt. You and only you. I nearly killed my brother and father.

We stayed there and hugged for a while, me still crying and shaking ferociously, my brother and father a lot calmer than me. My brother had already called my aunt to get her to pick us up, AA was also already on the way, and so we just stood and hugged while we waited, uttering only a word or two and contemplating in silence. By the time my aunt arrived my tears had not dried

up. She got out of her car, wearing a similar expression of shock and or horror, and hugged the three of us all at once.

“What in the world happened?” she exclaimed, looking questioningly at my dad. I guess she didn’t know who’d been behind the wheel. I gritted my teeth and looked her square in the face, deciding it was the best thing to do to stop the guilt from festering.

“I took the turn too quickly, didn’t see a bontebok and crashed the car” I replied. It sounds like a simple sentence to say, but it nearly destroyed me. The guilt was doing a pretty bang up job of reminding me that manslaughter had almost taken place today. My aunt nodded in that mystic way of hers and hugged only me this time.

“Fucking bonteboks, am I right?” she smiled encouragingly. The three of us actually managed to laugh, and though we looked a mess, hair all over the place, cuts and bruises visible on our faces, a bit of the guilt evaporated in that moment.

“Fucking bonteboks” I echoed, the tears stopping to spawn from my eyes. We got into her car and drove back to the camp with the radio on loud. There was a bit of chatter and laughter, but to be honest the shock hadn’t worn off quite yet. It was still rather tight, like a boa constrictor around my neck, and though they did a better job than me of hiding it, I could see the same shock still resounding within my father and brother’s eyes.

We got back to the camp and took some rescue remedy to calm our nerves. I would have rather smoked a joint, the rescue remedy had a slow onset, but not only did I not have any weed, but I also most certainly wouldn’t have smoked it this close to family.

I sat on my bed and stared at the white wall opposite me. It’s funny what an experience like this can do to a person. Maybe in a different universe this experience would have thrust me into a depression, maybe I would have become a heroin addict or a meth head, always in search of some kind of release from the guilt. Maybe in another I would have simply decided to never step into another car again, seeing them truly for the deathtraps that they are.

But in this universe, the only one we truly know and love, I saw this experience as the most important lesson I could learn in life. Because life is a living and breathing organism, just like a human, it beats and beats and it breathes and breathes, and just as easily as it can continue doing these things, it can stop and be no more, just like that. It won’t ask for permission, before taking its leave of absence. So that’s exactly how you must treat it. As the fun and vulnerable entity that it is. Love it, to the fullest, make the most of your time with it, and when you want to do something,

you do it, and when you've made a mistake, you fix it. It's as simple as that, though people can tend to disagree. That's just how it is, love it, respect it, and above all, make the most of it.

In other words, this realization led me to a much more simplified actualization, one that didn't have so many analogies and whatnot. Get the girl. Get back the friends. I'm alive now, so by God why should I wait.

### Chapter 23: So, I finally opened it, and I'm glad I did

The last day and night in Bontebok went by a lot quicker than expected, probably due to the fact that I wasn't drinking. It seemed like an unwritten rule had taken effect; everyone was taking it easy on the alcohol, and the evening was therefore just as fun as the one before, but easily more intelligible. I stayed a little shaken up throughout the remaining festivities. I was a lot quieter than before and must have seemed quite intense at times, but I think most of my relatives simply took it for what it was, a combination of a strong hangover and that unshakable feeling you almost killed your brother and father.

The drive home on Sunday morning also went by in a blur, the new rental car had been dropped off the night before already, and as I warily got into the back seat I felt an uneasy stomach sensation that came in waves throughout the entirety of the drive. I was noticeably relieved when we arrived at Theresa's, I literally jumped out of the car as soon as it had parked and gulped for fresh air, but neither my father or my brother made any comment about my behavior. I mean why should they even, they were there, they didn't need an explanation.

The pair accompanied me to the gate where they briefly greeted Theresa and Ryan (Stephan was off working), and then drove on to get back to Somerset West, where the two of them were staying for the next week. I briefly chatted with Theresa and Ryan over a steaming cup of tea, telling them about my first driving experience as well as downplaying my binge drinking to a stomach bug I had managed to acquire from uncooked meat. As usual, Theresa was worried sick when I told her about the crash, but she also seemed somewhat impressed that I was talking about it so openly. It was something I was going to try and stick to from now on, no more bottling up inside of me, no more pretending that problems would just go away on their own. From now on, I was going to talk openly about everything with everyone, so long as they were interested of course.

The evening crept up on us a lot quicker than anticipated and before I knew it, we had eaten dinner and retired our separate ways to go to bed. I sat for a long time, trying to think of things I could do to solve the problem that I had created. Nothing came to me. So, I wrote some more poetry, or rather I attempted to create some new poetry, about my past weekend, but for obvious reasons I could only write about her. And so, after the third or fourth failed attempt, I decided to give up and listen to some music to calm my nerves. I knew this wasn't going to be easy, problem solving was never easy, but I guess I had expected to at least have half a plan of action after my newfound insight.

I unlocked my phone to start playing my music and was surprised to be hit literally smack in the face by something so obvious I was genuinely confused as to how I could have missed it. I still had one unopened notification. From Dylan if I wasn't mistaken, and here I was a week later, completely unaware that it even existed.

I took a deep breath and opened the message. It wasn't long, just one or two sentences really. *We need to talk my friend. Meet me when you're feeling up to it.* I stared at the words and tried to make sense of them. I had seen Dylan multiple times since last Monday when he had sent the message. Not once in all that time did he come up to me 'to talk', let alone did he come up to me for any other reason. Was he that afraid of Evan? How bad was the situation really?

In reality, I had again been hopeful for just a simple answer, something of a clarity that could at least point me remotely in the direction of illumination, but what I got was just more bloody questions. Still, it was more than I'd had in the past week, it was a step towards something even if it was just adding to the confusion, so I wrote him back using as little words as possible, growing excited at the sheer possibility of hope.

*Tomorrow before first bell, by the tuk shop.* I waited for a minute or two, to see if he'd reply. Sure enough, *got it mate, see you then*, dinged through, and I put my phone away and turned off my light. Tomorrow would be the start of my final chapter here at Bergford. It would be all or nothing, I would win back my friends and my last hope for Emily, and if it didn't work out, then I would do some incredibly stupid shit trying.

I lay very still in the darkness for what must have been another hour, before finally managing to fall asleep. Thoughts of Emily overwhelmed me even though I wanted to think about other things. My near-death experienced was trying to emphasize the whole 'stop bottling it up, let it out, think about it' way of life. So that's what I was doing. Or something like it, because man I fell asleep with the warmest feeling in my stomach. A feeling I knew was born from sweet hope and a feeling I now knew I would do everything to maintain. A week's cold turkey just hadn't worked, in fact it had intensified the feelings within. It was oh so obvious that I felt dumb for even acknowledging the thought.

Emily was my heroin, and I was the weakest junkie of all.

---

As I walked towards the meeting place, my chest tightened a little, much like it had when I got into the car yesterday and this morning. I guess my body was learning and adapting, setting up fight or flight responses to be used on autopilot if similar situations managed to corner and threaten me again. I tried to relax as I approached the dormant tuk shop, Dylan was standing there waiting for me already. When I saw him, the tightness in my chest eased up, and I managed to forget the betrayal I had suffered only a week ago. He saw me and smiled, coming to meet me half way and taking my hand in a handshake.

“Hey man, it’s good to see you!” he exclaimed, walking with me the rest of the way to the tuk shop. I nodded my head in agreement but didn’t say anything, figuring we should get right to business and not make any small talk. We only had a few minutes before the first class of the day would start and I didn’t feel like having to wait for the first break to finish the conversation.

“So, I thought about what happened on Monday for quite a while after you left the school grounds. I know the others didn’t believe what you were trying to say, but I couldn’t help feeling guilty for what had happened. Not that you didn’t deserve some kind of signaling to let you know how shitty you treated us on that evening, but the fact of the matter is, I would have done it differently. I figured hearing your side of the story couldn’t hurt, that’s why I wanted to talk to you” said Dylan, sitting down on the ground and leaning against his school bag.

“So, kicking me out of the group, that was Evan’s idea?” I asked.

“Yes and no. It was his idea, but we all agreed that it was the best thing to do” he replied. His eyes really did look guilty, there was something he wasn’t telling me just yet. “So, what do you remember from Friday night?”

“I smoked the joint with Evan, Layla, Grace and Hannah. Then the ‘trip’ or whatever started. The doctor at the hospital told me I had smoked DMT, which explains why I don’t remember anything up to the point where I punched some guy in the face.” I slowed my breath, fearing the answer of my next question but asking it nonetheless. “What really happened that night?”

Dylan shifted uncomfortably after I asked the question. I could see he didn’t really want to answer, or rather that he was struggling to find an adequate answer, so I admired him all the more for telling it how it was. “While you were blacked out, and I do believe you that you were, you said some things to everyone in the group. The worst was probably directed at Evan *and* Emily, but you had something saved up for everyone. It was one of the weirdest things I’ve ever seen.

One moment you were on the couch, the next you were screaming at Evan, calling Emily a whore, and a whole bunch of other shit which hit really hard. You called me a homosexual fish. Not even a joke. The worst part for me wasn't what you were saying, it was how you said it with such certainty that it had to be real for you. You seemed totally aware, that's why no one believed you when you told us about the DMT."

The clock struck 08:00 and the sounds of students rushing to their first class carried over to where we were sitting by the tuk shop. I let Dylan's words sink in, finding it hard to believe them as the truth. I couldn't have done such things, it wasn't like me. Not because I thought that I was some kind of perfect human being, but because I loved and cared for these people. There wasn't anything remotely close to a logical explanation for what I had done.

"There's also this other thing, and it's straight up my fault and I feel like you deserve to know," started Dylan. He had gotten up and started walking in the direction of his math classroom. I followed in suit and waited for him to finish. "I brought the weed to the party that night. I didn't put DMT in it obviously, but I think I might know who did. Talk to Peter Stroombe when you can. I bought the weed from him. I'm really sorry, Arlo. I hope you can fix this".

I struggled to find the words for a response, because the reality hurt a lot harder than I had expected. I had always assumed that the weed was planted there on purpose, that somebody had tried to drug me (I had even considered it possibly being part of Evan's revenge), but to know that all of this had somehow been the result of some cruel trick of God, made it so much worse.

"How do I fix this, Dylan? If no one will talk to me, even give me the chance to explain, then how can I make things go back to how they were? Why can't you just tell them the truth?" I asked, clinging onto this lifeline that had been thrown to me. Dylan sighed and stopped before the door to his classroom. He looked me straight in my eyes and allowed his guilt to show even more.

"Evan likes big gestures. Something that shows loyalty" he replied. "But be careful, Arlo, it's easy to do reckless things when there's nothing to lose anymore, do try and remember that you haven't lost anything yet. You've merely misplaced some things." And with that, he opened the door of his classroom and approached the teacher to apologize for being late.

I walked on down the hallway, approaching my own classroom to join in for morning Math. I let simmer a while what I had just been told. I knew I would spend the next two hours processing anyways, but before opening the door to go to class, I wanted to admit to myself that I had done the things Dylan said I had. It was my way of opening myself up, to be able to fully continue this

journey I had now indefinitely embarked on. I *did* abuse my friends that night, I *did* disregard everything that they had done for me here, and far worse than any of these things, I *had* abused the girl I was madly in love with. Why, I did not know. That's where Peter would come in, he clearly had experience with drugs and stuff (the first time I saw him he was shirtless and making bird noises) but admitting to my crimes was a great first step. I could feel it, weird as it was, that the way to fix all of this would come to me very soon.

And of course, I was right about that too. It did come very soon, but even now as I retell the story, I do sometimes wonder if fighting fire with fire, had truly been the smartest thing to do.

## Chapter 24: A psychedelic conversation

After assembly ended, I scanned the huge group of students that surrounded me in the big hall, looking for my target. I mean it shouldn't have been hard to find him, there was always something different about Peter, regardless of what day, time, or place it was. When he was wearing a shirt, it would be on backwards, when he was wearing shoes, they would be taped to his hands. The point is, you knew how to find the guy if you needed to find him. And as luck would have it, on this particular day, I had a relatively simple time locating the boy with only one shirt sleeve on his shirt, and the other tied around his neck. How he was even allowed to attend the assemblies I still have no idea. Perhaps he had special permissions that us other students did not. I mean he was strange after all, so there was no reason why he couldn't be *that* strange.

As he left the hall with a rather quick pace, I followed him a few meters behind, not wanting to approach him in front of all these people. I tailed him till we reached the gate to leave the school grounds, at which point I was completely ready to abandon the mission. Again, Lady Luck decided to cut me some slack for once, and Peter turned right, hiking towards the rugby fields. I followed and decided to let him know I wanted to talk.

"I was wondering when you'd finally come talk to me. I hadn't expected it to take you this long to apologize to be honest. Dylan said you were a pretty cool guy" said Peter matter of factly, without even turning his head to face me. So, Dylan had already spoken to him, probably last week. What on earth should I apologize for? He had to be joking.

"Don't you think you should apologize to me? I mean you did kind of drug me and let my friends think I'm a complete asshole." I responded, trying but failing to keep any kind of menace from my voice. Peter said nothing for a while but continued walking with me at his heels. Eventually we came to a little hill of grass, and he sat down, waiting for me to do the same.

"Do you really think that I drugged you though? Or is that what you're telling yourself so that you can come to terms better with the reality of the situation? Remember, perception cannot be synthesized without a little truth." I looked away from him and across the rugby fields.

"I know you didn't drug me, but why would you sell Dylan DMT laced weed? I just don't understand, why would you make anyone go through what I did?"

"Well what did you go through? Dylan only mentioned the DMT, but I doubt anything worse happened than a little liberation of your third eye."

I took a deep breath, still staring over the fields as if expecting something to happen as I spoke, some kind of reaction from something, anything. And I told him the story, as I remembered it. Not the story I had told Theresa and my grandmother, not the story I had made myself to believe for the past week, but the true story. That I had met some ancient Elves, that basically tricked me into trying to beat someone up. That those same Elves, had ruined several friendships in the space of a few minutes. And that those Elves had destroyed a love that never knew the hope and possibilities it could reach.

Peter listened intensely, only asking a lot of questions during my description of the Elves and the planet that I visited. After I had finished and told him what the doctor had told me about the DMT and how strange it is that I was the only one effected, he nodded and smiled.

“You know it’s funny, Arlo. When Dylan came to me and asked me if I had sold him DMT laced weed, I told him that he was insane, and that I would never waste my preciously extracted learning device on non-psychonauts. Now I see I managed to mix up the bags. Common mistake.”

“Common mistake? Are you actually being serious? How is that a common mistake?” I shouted. He shushed me and told me to speak softer.

“If you have a lot of bags, and you mostly just smoke everything yourself it’s extremely easy to misplace and or mix up a bag. It’s just shit luck, or extremely good luck that you ended up with my DMT stash. What is weird though is that you were truly the only one tripping. I mean the chances of that are crazy. How whack is that?” he said, laughing at the thought. I rolled my eyes. I guess I’d just have to accept his lack of an apology, as *the* apology. Surely, he would have some idea why I had attacked my friends though.

“So how do you explain what I said to my friends? How do you explain me punching someone on the face while tripping absolute balls?” I asked. He laughed again at this and slapped me on the back.

“Oh, Arlo. This is so great. Accidentally becoming a psychedelic explorer is perhaps the best way to get into it. I remember the first time I smoked DMT when I was 14. I stayed awake for a week after that because I thought I had seen the end of the world coming. Classic shit. But your experience is the first time I’ve ever heard of anything like it. Psychedelics don’t usually do that to people. They’re supposed to unlock your third eye, your spiritual core, not the beast. I’m guessing you’ve got some kind of darkness deep inside you my friend. You should probably smoke DMT more regularly to sort that shit out.”

I shuddered at his words. I had a feeling I understood what he was trying to say, but feared admitting to it too much to actively comprehend. “What is the beast?” I asked dumbly.

Peter laughed again, chilling me. This whole conversation was way too entertaining for him, there was definitely *something* wrong with this guy. “The beast lives in everyone, Arlo. It’s not just a drug thing, though it’s often only seen through the clear window of a drug induced stupor.”

“The id” I whispered, knowing I was right even before Peter agreed.

“The unconscious animalistic desires of every human, according to Freud. Everyone’s beast is different, but they all bring about the same kind of pain and destruction. Apparently, your id is something that’s very watchful over you, and wants you all for itself. Sounds a bit like an overprotective mother” he paused occasionally as if deep in thought before continuing his analysis. Though only two weeks earlier I’d have had trouble believing even 1% of the things Peter was talking about, the things he said somehow made sense to me now. And that just killed me so much more. It meant plain and simple that I was responsible for what I had done. Sure, the DMT had provoked it, and commandeered it for a large part, but there was still no doubt that it was me saying and doing the things I did. And worst of all, I seemed to believe them.

“So why would we want to allow the id to take control of us?” I asked.

“Catharsis. Why do we snap, do irrational things, even when we’re not on drugs? To keep the id happy. Through catharsis we keep it fed, inhibiting its ability to take control. But in some situations, it takes over completely, perhaps when you’ve been letting go all night, ripping into people, looking for conflict, then through some unforeseen scenario, the id can take over completely.”

“So why would anyone take psychedelics then? If you’re always allowing them to hand control over to the id, then isn’t that dangerous?”

“Yeah but psychedelics usually don’t do that, especially not DMT. Cocaine, lots of uppers, are used for catharsis. But psychedelics are spiritual teachers, they help you, not destroy you. Whatever happened to you, is an outlier situation to put it as simply as possible. And it also means that your id was close to taking control anyways. The DMT only acted as a catalyst, so basically I did you a solid by forcing out the negative shit quickly.” This guy really was full of himself, I had half a mind to tell him to shut up and get on my way, after all I’d learned a lot as it were, but something kept me glued to the spot. I needed to understand more.

“So why do you take psychedelics? What can you learn from the Elves, or teachers or whatever? And why didn’t I learn anything” I asked. Peter chuckled, tearing a tuft of grass from beneath his feet and flinging it straight ahead.

“Now *that*, is a complicated question my friend. Why do we do anything that we do? I can’t really explain to you what I’ve learnt, but I can tell you that you most certainly did learn something. It’s not the conscious mind that learns something, but rather the sleeping mind. The same part where your id is active, learns and adapts to the things you learn from psychedelics. That means that some provoking factor, usually a moment of intense stress brings out what you have learnt and forces it into your conscious mind. It’ll seem like an insight, but if you think long and hard about it, you’ll realize you knew it the whole time.”

Was it really possible that this could explain all the crazy things that had happened to me in the last week. The car crash. If that wasn’t a moment of intense stress, I don’t know what was. But that truly means that the DMT was really behind me wanting to sort out all the mess. Shit this was confusing.

“So how do I utilize what I’ve learnt? How do I take it, and turn around the bad things that have happened?” I ask.

“Well you already know the answer to that. Otherwise you wouldn’t be here talking to me right now. This is part of you utilizing your knowledge. Don’t you see, this is all part of the plan” replied Peter. His eyes were intense as he ripped more grass from the hill. He was now arranging it in some kind of pattern, a fractal or something, it reminded me of the DMT planet.

“You’ve learned the secret to openness, at least I think you have. Most people aren’t so lucky. You don’t have to take psychedelics to learn such secrets, but it’s sure a hell of a lot easier than without them. So, make sure to carry the gift with you, wherever you go and what you decide to do. Don’t make me regret accidentally giving you my DMT.”

He got up and abandoned his fractal, starting to walk back the way we had come. I could tell that he didn’t expect nor really want me to follow him, so I stayed sitting, unsure of what to say.

“Chat to me before you head back to Berlin. I’ll be interested to see how you solved the problem, and if you’ve become a psychonaut by then.” And with that, he turned around and left, leaving me sitting on a grassy hill beside a fractal made of tufts of grass. I didn’t do much after he left. Pretty much just sat there really, trying to comprehend everything that Peter had told me. It

wasn't so much of a question as to whether I should believe him, because I certainly did. It was more of a disgust I was feeling to learn about the presence of my beast. He said that everyone had it, but why was my one such an asshole. Why did it feel the necessity to destroy everything I had gained since coming to Cape Town? I mean how self-destructive was that? Why didn't my id just want me to have weird sexual fantasies. I'd much rather deal with that than deal with something that wants to destroy my happiness.

As disturbing as the realization was, it did force me to think back to the main problem at hand. How would I be able to solve the problem the beast had created. Dylan had promised that he would try and talk to Evan, but I still had to do something that would show my loyalty, capture his attention. And that was a pretty vague description of how to win your friends back. Like seriously, surely Dylan could have been a bit more exact as to what was big and loyal. Should I bake him a cake? Maybe some cookies? What was big and loyal?

And then I thought back to the first day of school, the reason why Evan and I had become friends. It had started with a collection of laughter, disrupting the morning assembly. And then I remembered who had come to shout at us that day, and who had shouted at me several times even after that day and had awarded me a total of 9 hours detention until now. Ms. Cliffords. And then all of a sudden, I knew what I needed to do, and it was big and bold. Not quite loyal, but definitely enough to catch the group's attention. Just to clarify, no, I was not planning on murdering Ms. Cliffords, though I'm sure that that could have also worked.

But what I was planning had the room to be perfect, exactly what I needed to get back to where I was. And so, I grabbed a notebook from my bag, and got to work, furiously writing as though my life depended on it. The time for the end of break came, but I stayed where I was, fixated by my page and quite possibly being guided by the fractal beside me. Something inside me clicked all at once, and what escaped my pen in the hour that I continued sitting there, was a stroke of pure and undeniable genius.

## Chapter 25: An ode to the milkiest cow in town

*An ode to the milkiest cow in town*

*It does so seem, that this here cow, is filled with milk to the brim,  
My sources say that this here milk is gone so sour, it's why she's dim,  
So, what to do, with a cow gone so old, and oh so bitter,  
Really nothing else to do, shove your hand right up her shitter.  
Right then and there, search for the infect, execute it if it differs,  
You know this cow, we all know her, it's the old bitching cow, Missus Cliffords.*

*Like a witch that needs some dicking,  
Eager with legs open wide,  
To see her get down licking,  
Such disgust does one rarely find.*

*Tomorrow when she finds this,  
A gruesome face she will pull,  
Let's enjoy then now, while still in bliss,  
Kak teacher, kak person, kak dull,  
I wish I had a knife for her skull.  
Fuck you, Ms. Cliffords.*

So, here I was, going fully nuclear. And there was no one to stop me but myself. I did question the ethics behind what I was doing. I mean, I understood that writing hate poetry about one of my teachers, wasn't exactly in line with being open and learning from my experiences. In fact, I knew very well that it was quite the opposite entirely. But I still wanted to do it. Maybe to get rid of the last bits of darkness that still dwelled within me. Maybe, I had just come to hate her that much. But far more likely was that I was under the impression that this poem was going to be my salvation. It would solve everything. My hatred for Ms. Cliffords was undoubtedly the one thing that Evan and I shared, that could be ruthlessly exploited.

I snuck through the hallways with my papers in my bag. If a teacher would find me I'd just tell them I was late back from a doctor's appointment, looking for a toilet, bla bla bla. I was an exchange student, I could say what I wanted.

I approached the first notice board hanging directly outside the assembly hall. I looked around, double checking that there wasn't anyone else in sight, then proceeded to take one of my seven printed copies out of my bag and stapled it to the notice board. It had been slow work, the night before. I had to make sure after all that there was nothing on the pages that could somehow identify me. Any writing styles, big and small letters, etc., had to be completely normalized. And the printing had to be normal too. I had never tried so hard to make myself completely unidentifiable from one of my actions. It was a lot harder than I'd previously imagined and it made me feel like the Zodiac killer, except for the obvious fact that I hadn't murdered at least four people.

I found the other notice boards and stapled the rest of my papers. I was hoping they would be read before a teacher took them down, but all I really needed was one kid to take a picture and send it around the school. That was the great thing about high school nowadays. Nobody had to be physically there to take part in an event. If there was picture documentation, you'd be sure to see it at some point.

I looked at the last paper I had stapled, and read through the poem quickly, one last time, trying to decide if this was A) going to work, and B) not going to get me expelled. I read the letters on the left side, downwards. *I'm sorry let's talk*. Evan would definitely be able to see it, if the message of the poem didn't speak for itself. Not a lot of students hated her like Evan and me, but the few who did wouldn't be as stupid as I was about to be. They'd maybe have some more finesse in their torture methods, but I was done with the cold war. I wanted the hot shit, I wanted fire on fire.

I hurried back to the history classroom I had left only five minutes before and sat back down in my chair, smiling at the certain havoc I had just unleashed. To cover my tracks for the timeline of the crime, I had called the office pretending to be my father, wanting to speak to me. I had been summoned from the classroom to the office, and briefly pretended to speak with my father. Then the stapling had taken place, no longer than three minutes, and back in the classroom I was, perfect alibi, perfect execution.

The movie we were watching was almost over, as was the class, and as I prepared myself for what was to come, I couldn't help feeling completely at ease. Which was weird. I had just done

some straight up gangster things (yes, I didn't pop a cap in her ass, but this was still pretty ballsy), and here I was chilling like it was nothing but a thang. To paint a picture, I looked like a seven year old waiting for the New Years celebrations to kick off the fireworks.

I looked over to where Evan was sitting, playing on his phone and paying no attention to the movie. This one's for you my friend, this one's for you. And then the fireworks exploded.

---

"Who would dare? Who would dare hang such vile and unfounded mockery on the notice boards? Answer me!" The reaction was even better than what I could have hoped for. An emergency assembly, the first one called this entire year, all to try and weasel out who had hung the pages around the school. The headmaster had briefly spoken about the situation at hand before handing the reigns over to Ms. Cliffords.

And let me tell you, Ms. Cliffords was fuming, literally steaming as she walked back and forth across the assembly stage, shouting random blusters of fury, much to the amusement of many of the students. It was entertainment in its sheerest form, Ms. Cliffords citing random lines from the poem, and asking the student body if we thought it was funny. Every time a student couldn't contain his laughter, she would pounce on him and shout, "Was it you? Was it *you*, you little shit? Do you think I need a good dicking?" It was never them, obviously, the real culprit was well hidden, standing amidst the other Grade 10's, pretending that this was the first he'd heard of the situation.

The poems had been left hanging for the better part of the second break. Only near the end did a teacher notice the first one, right outside the assembly hall, and bother taking it down. By then pretty much the whole school had read the poem or at least heard about it, and the rumor that this would lead to an emergency assembly, had spread long before the assembly was even called.

"Shove your hand, right up her shitter? You think this is funny" she shouted again, her voice shrill, scanning the crowd of students, looking for a sign of weakness. There was more laughter, this time coming from a grade eight student at the very front of the crowd.

"Do you think this is funny *boy*?" she shouted at him. He shut up, said nothing and shook his head. "You're all going to stay in the hall until the student responsible for this abomination steps forward. I don't care if you're still standing here tomorrow, I will have justice!"

The crowd of students collectively groaned. It was obvious now already, half an hour into the emergency assembly that nobody was going to come forward. And I needed Ms. Cliffords to realize that as quickly as possible, because my big and bold gesture might backfire a little if every student was forced to stay late into the evening in the assembly hall, just because somebody thought it would be funny to write a horrible poem about Ms. Cliffords.

I looked around to gauge a general reaction from the other students around me. Everyone was facing forward, trying to focus on the batty woman shouting with rage on top of the stage. But one boy was not facing forward. Evan was watching me with a careful eye. Once I noticed him watching, he turned to the front like the others around him, but for a split second I had seen something in his eyes. A gleam, perhaps, something that said he was impressed. Maybe I'd been imagining it though, it was only a second really, but whatever it was, it gave me energy. He wouldn't care that we all had to stand here. No, he'd be impressed that it had caused enough of a ruckus for an emergency assembly. Perfect.

"I wish I had a knife for her skull. THAT IS A DEATH THREAT! I WILL HAVE THE CULPRITS HEAD FOR THIS! I SWEAR IT!" screamed Ms. Cliffords, again scanning, wild eyed. A few chuckles sounded at, their sources unable to hold them back, but only one boy, a grade 11 named Brian Clift, had the balls enough to raise his hand in defiance. From where I was standing, a good 15 meters away from Ms. Cliffords, it was impossible to miss the spark that glowed in her eyes. She thought she had him.

"Yes, boy. Do you have something to admit to?" she asked carefully, almost whispering each word. She sounded hungry, the woman was genuinely putting on a spectacular show.

"Well Mrs. It seems that you're getting upset about a death threat, but you just threatened to behead the author of the poem. It just comes across as a little hypocritical, that's all" said Brian innocently. He even shrugged his shoulders as if to solidify the perception that he truly meant no harm. The spark in Cliffords's eyes became something else. Everyone saw it, a raging storm full of blight and terror hiding behind those elderly eyes. And it wanted someone's head for sure.

"In that case, five hours of detention for contempt. And I *apologize* for coming across as hypocritical" said Ms. Cliffords smugly. I panicked. This was all going to end very badly if Cliffords went off on a detention spree. I mean she started with five hours, where would she end? How many hours of detention had she given out in her lifetime? Wasn't there a limit for teachers like her, teachers clearly only interested in absolute and undeniable abuse of power?

The assistant headmaster turned his head towards the lunatic of a teacher as she dished out her first punishment. It seemed as though he would stand up and stop the whole show, not all heroes wore capes after all, but that hope was lost after he turned his head away again. Maybe it was just me, but he looked somewhat ashamed.

Brian's expression went sour as the punishment was handed out and so he said no more, retreating from the battle. And right on que another hand shot up. This time a ninth grader named Adam Larrington.

"Yes, boy. You better not have an opinion to share like your friend Brian," said Ms. Cliffords, calling on Adam with a venomous tone.

"Not at all an opinion ma'am. It's just, well, the break's been quite a while already and I really need to use the bathroom. The tuk shop was selling those dodgy burgers today and I really don't know how long –" started Adam, infecting the students around him with uncontrollable bouts of laughter. It was so innocent, but also so obviously meant as a dig that I couldn't help but smile myself. Most students did, so Ms. Cliffords retaliated the only way she knew how.

"Fine Mr. Larrington. Five hours for you, for contempt. All the hours given out today must be served in one sitting. So, think of those five hours the next time you think about making toilet jokes in an emergency assembly." Ms. Cliffords had seemed to reach the next stage of her rage. She no longer shouted, but opted instead to speak softly and slowly, absolutely relishing in her power. The assistant headmaster again turned his head towards the now most certainly out of line teacher, but once again did nothing. How many more students would receive detention until the siege was broken? Surely this could go on for hours, even if only Ms. Cliffords had the energy to do so. For her all that mattered was that she could do it.

"So, will the boy responsible step forward, or will he allow his peers to be punished for crimes they did not commit?" continued Ms. Cliffords. And so did the silence. No one moved a muscle, let alone speak a word. And even if they wanted to, what would they say? Would they take responsibility for something that everyone suspected would at least get the student suspended? No, there are no people like that in our world, though to be honest, I'm glad there aren't, otherwise it may have complicated the whole situation. And by complicated, I mean I would have probably had to own up to my crime so that the idiot trying to play the hero wasn't ripped to shreds by the beast called Cliffords.

A hand shot up. My breathing slowed as Cliffords did something unusual. She did not say ‘yes boy’, nor did she address the student in any demeaning way. I couldn’t see who it was from where I was standing, but I feared the worst, a straight-shooting student who wanted to save his classmates.

“Yes Eric. Do you have something to say?” Was I suddenly hearing things, or was Ms. Cliffords’s voice suddenly sweeter than in the last combined hour she had been speaking? Why suddenly all the sugar? Was she trying to trick us into thinking she was a sweetheart? Would Kim Jong Un try to convince his people that there was no famine going on? Yes, people did try crazy things sometime.

“It’s just, that I’m rather confused Mrs. Is writing poetry a crime now? You see, I write love poetry from time to time and I don’t want to be doing anything wrong –” Eric was a little legend. A grade eight with bigger balls than all of the matrics combined. Or perhaps I was being unfair, I mean they couldn’t really afford to be kicked out of school so close to graduating. But still this little grade eight did not give a shit. He was probably trying to earn credibility, much in the same way I had been trying to do the exact same thing by writing the poem that had gotten us here. So, I respected this little man, especially when he stood strong and didn’t quiver when the briefly sweet version of Cliffords snapped like a twig.

“FIVE HOURS OF DETENTION YOU SNOTTY LITTLE WEASLE!” her voice bellowed. The level of venom and menace stayed constant, but the sheer volume and range of her voice now was incredible. The back walls could have cracked, let’s put it that way, I wouldn’t have been surprised. A few students around Eric found the outburst hilarious. Each one started cracking up, big haughty laughter suddenly echoing throughout the hall, until it was struck down, just like the James’s and Eric before them.

“Every boy and girl that is laughing, from here forth, will receive two hours of detention for each second of assembly disturbed. That’s five for you three” she said, pointing at Eric’s friends. The hall became silent again, eerily so, as we waited for who would be claimed next by the homicidal maniac dancing on the stage. No new students raised their hands. The silence this time seemed definite, final and daunting. No one was going to challenge this beast any longer. From now on, we would simply stand and try our best not to laugh at the work of genius held in Ms. Cliffords right hand.

“Like a witch that needs some dick –” Ms. Cliffords’s voice was back at baseline, perfectly aware that she didn’t need to shout to invoke her terror. But for the first time in an hour, she had finally overstepped her abilities. Though three times till now, the assistant headmaster had turned, ready for action, but ended up doing nothing, this time he stood up tall and approached the mic stand. He spoke with an amplified voice and though it didn’t reign terror like the voice of Ms. Cliffords, his voice orchestrated a sense of something far more valuable; authority.

“That’s quite enough Ms. Cliffords. Thank you for your demonstration but that’ll be all for today. The students are now dismissed.” He left the mic stand as casually as he had waltzed up, went back to his chair, picked up his jacket, and simply left. Tarantino couldn’t have scripted it better, I shit you not. Ms. Cliffords now wore that same expression that had taken hold of her when I’d cursed at her just a week before. Utter disbelief. It was like talking back to Hitler. Nobody talked back to Hitler, not even Hitler talked back to Hitler. But what if Hitler had had a superior? And what if that superior told Hitler that he had overstepped? That’s kind of what it was like when Ms. Cliffords finally went quiet for the last time during that assembly. Though I do admit that comparing her to Hitler is probably not the most kosher thing to do, in fact I’ll probably get in a lot of shit for doing it here, in my own book. Freedom of speech goes a long way, but that long way becomes aggressively shorter when you’re comparing people with the Führer.

Kids had started leaving in all directions, and they were quick at it too. Almost as if they didn’t quite believe that the siege was over, and that the assistant headmaster would come back any second and start the whole thing all over again. Evan and the gang walked towards an exit just ahead of me, speaking in hushed whispers about the poem and its implications. At least that’s what I’d assumed since once or twice Evan and Layla had looked back at me with blank expressions. Had they found the message I had left for them? Were they impressed? Had they forgiven me?

Of course not. I wasn’t that naïve. I knew that this was only half the race, the last 50m would be the most testing, especially given that I didn’t quite have a plan for the end game. The explanation part came next, obviously, and then the individual apologies. But how to explain was still a difficult part. If I was lucky, Dylan would tell them about the DMT. But then they might google DMT, and they wouldn’t be able to understand. I didn’t show them love and peace, the battle cry for all psychedelics. No, I showed them rage and spite, hate and flight. I abandoned them before they could even abandon me. So how would I explain it to them?

The group disappeared through one of the exits, and though I was still following at a slow pace, I soon realized that I was the last one left in the assembly hall. I still saw students ahead of me, it wasn't as though I'd been completely deserted in a few seconds, but there was still something eerie about the empty hall, something that reeked of trouble.

And even though I should have known by now, or at least learnt it by now, trouble always came with a name. And that particular name had been screaming at the entire student body for the last hour and a half.

"You know I know it was you, you devious little shit," Ms. Cliffords's voice told me it wasn't supposed to be one, but I couldn't help myself for taking it as a compliment. "I can't prove it yet. But when I do, those six hours you still have to do will turn into 10. After all, there's no fun in suspending an exchange student." Damnit, she definitely wasn't dumb. Suspension would have been way too dope, barring the rage I would have had to endure from my parents. But 10 hours of detention in one sitting. That was rough. No thank you, no turning back now.

"Ma'am, I know we've had our differences, but I swear to you I didn't write that. I can't even write very well, though I wish I could" I responded. My voice of innocence was very on point. And I mean very. It was pure, not a quiver nor a hint of hesitation showing through. And yeah, I was trying to phrase my response in the way that said, no, I didn't do it, but I wish I had. I couldn't help myself. In my eyes, I'd already won this battle. I was relatively sure that I about to win the war.

"That's not what your English teacher tells me. In fact, Mr. Willard mentioned you're probably the best in his class for creative writing. How odd is that?" Our eyes were locked in an intense battle, it was like something out of a political novel, candidate one trying to intimidate candidate two. And let me tell you something, candidate two was not going to have it.

"Oh, it's not odd at all ma'am. In fact, many great authors have failed to broaden their intellectual horizons. As in, they were awful poets. I am such a writer, short stories are easy, but poetry is a whole 'nother beast. One I just can't tame," I slurped up her compliment as if it were obvious. *Duh* I was a good writer. No shit. But that didn't incriminate me any more than the next student. Or at least, it didn't if I managed to phrase it right.

"So why did you do it?" asked Ms. Cliffords.

"I just told you ma'am, I didn't."

"But I know that you did, why did you do it, *boy*?"

“Ma’am, this is beginning to sound obsessive –” and just like I had slurped up the compliment, I slurped up her bait. Sure, I had won the war, and spectacularly so, but like soldiers who fight even after the declaration of peace, Ms. Cliffords was hell bent on inflicting the last casualty.

“Four more hours for contempt. And the same rules apply. All your hours must be served in one sitting. Second last day of school sounds splendid in fact. I look forward to seeing you in my office with the other three culprits.” A smile tore at her lips, and I guess in that moment she didn’t care about upholding appearances of professionalism. So, she grinned, her cheeks even flushing ever so slightly. And with that grin, she turned and left, leaving me stranded on my own Dunkirk.

I stood a little dumbly, annoyed at my stupidity. I had grossly underestimated my enemy, I mean I knew the woman was smart, otherwise she wouldn’t hold the position of power that she did (at least I don’t think you can inherit a teacher’s position), but somehow in my arrogance I had forgotten about her cunningness. And it had cost me another four hours. Wow. I had managed to set a new school detention record, though of course I didn’t know it at the time. But yeah, wow. I would be spending my second last day of Bergford High School, staring at a brick wall. And not even because I was caught. I had made sure I wouldn’t be caught. I would be staring at a brick wall, because of *contempt*.

## Chapter 26: The letters and their delivery

The rest of the week was rather uneventful. Rumors had spread around about who had actually written the poem, and I was glad to find out that not only was I not the only suspect, but rather only one of nearly forty students. Evan was a suspect too, as was pretty much every student who'd ever had some serious trouble with Ms. Cliffords. Students were called into the headmaster's office every day, who was chasing every wild lead to see if he could catch the genius. The truth of the matter was, however, that nobody actually knew anything. And I mean nobody. No one had seen me hanging up a poster, no one had seen me even walking around the school during the time it occurred, and no one but Ms. Cliffords and a few who knew how many hours of detention she had given me, had reason to suspect me of anything.

And so, I moved on to focus on how I could deliver my explanation to Evan and the gang. My solution was strikingly similar actually to how I had treated the big and bold gesture problem, so I guess you could say that there was certainly a trend revealing itself with how I was pulling things off these days.

Instead of writing a poem for each person I had hurt, I decided to do something a lot simpler, but grander still, with perfect space and opportunity to really explain everything to my fullest ability, while still giving those who I was apologizing to, the time to process through what I was saying. I would write a letter for each person, about nine or ten letters total, and then deliver them individually to each person. The point behind the letter though was to not discuss it immediately, but a day or two afterwards. And if I wrote these letters well enough, after the process was done, I should have won back the trust of my friends, even if it was only for a little less than a month.

And so, upon returning home after school on Friday afternoon, I powered up my computer and started slurping at my steaming tea. I started with the letter's I thought would be easiest to write, the ones where the story could be told in black and white. Layla, James, Grace, Clara and Dylan. Their letters were all relatively similar and also followed a similar structure, but they still came out to be highly personalized to each individual. Though I couldn't quite remember what I had said to each person (being blacked out on DMT being the reason), I tried to prove through argumentation that it wasn't important what I had said, but far more important that I didn't mean it and wished every day since I said it that I could take it back. I explained what I had learned, about the DMT and the beast within me, and what I did intentionally make sure of in each and

every letter, was that I claimed full responsibility for all of my actions on that night, and that I accepted that it was my fault that it had turned out the way it had.

I finished those letters on that evening and even managed to edit them once or twice so that they resembled very closely what I expected from my finished product. Evan and Emily, however, would have to wait till tomorrow. To be honest, Evan wasn't even the main problem, I think if I'd wanted to, I could have still written his letter on that evening as well, but for some strange reason I grouped him and his sister together, and because I knew that Emily's would be something else entirely, I decided to leave them for a fresher mind the next morning.

And by God am I glad that I waited. For the letters that I produced after a few refreshing hours of sleep, are to this day some of the most truthful, ridiculously emotional pieces of writing I have ever produced. And that's why I won't publish them here. Emily's letter is quite literally a piece of my soul, carved by myself and presented on a silver platter for open inspection, sure, but it doesn't mean I want everyone looking at that piece of my soul. It was hard enough allowing myself to give Emily her letter. And I also won't pretend that I didn't cry while I wrote it. I cried with happiness and sadness, and regret all at once. It was the most fucked up salad of emotions that had ever been served in my young life. So that's why I won't publish it. Or maybe I will, if there's a bonus edition of the book and I'm greedy enough... But even then, I *probably* won't.

So, I finished the letters. By Sunday evening I had revised each one at least three times, and Emily's at least 12 times. With each new revision I actually managed to find something to add, remove or just finetune. Which was nice because finding something to fix served as important proof that I wasn't insane and reading them constantly because I had lost my mind.

I printed each letter out and signed them with my sorry excuse of a signature and sealed them shut in their respective envelopes. I now had a stack of what can only be melodramatically defined as my literal last hopes and dreams, and so I placed them carefully in my schoolbag for the following morning, largely mistrusting myself out of fear that I would misplace them and lose them.

I slept soundlessly that night as though the watcher of the night was as eager to deliver these letters as I myself was and woke up the next morning with a warm feeling of energy inside my stomach. Electric, but without the hectic buzzing and potential to burn. I showered, drank my morning tea and got down to the breakfast table where I watched Ryan fall asleep once again while furiously trying to shovel spoon after spoon of coco pops down his throat. The routine was a

welcome one, it's hard to explain if you haven't experienced a morning routine before, but there's something extremely appealing about all the gears of a machine simply churning away, doing the same thing every morning. Because when it churns, it means it's working, and that is downright awesome.

The drive to the school was also routine, the radio commentator was talking again about the upcoming Scottish Independence Referendum, which seemed to have a chance of being passed. The traffic was thick and it took a minute or two longer to pass by the countless other Range Rovers on their way to drop off schoolchildren.

As we walked onto the school grounds, I hesitated not a moment longer. I grabbed the stack of letters still inside my bag and approached Evan and the gang in their usual morning spot. Initially I had toyed with the idea of giving out the letters during the first break, but eventually decided against it, given that time wasn't really anything I should be playing around with anymore. Even if it shortened the outcome of my mission by only two hours, those were two hours less of being unable to focus or think about anything but the letters.

No one said anything as I wordlessly handed Evan his letter. To my surprise, he immediately accepted it and nodded his head. His expression was still blank, but the motion alone was enough to encourage me to press on. Letter by letter, everyone took theirs and placed it in their bags. And so, the moment came where I faced Emily, practically shaking as I approached her, trying to hold her gaze. Even as I think back on it now, knowing all that I do, it still feels like I was giving her a knife and telling her it would be OK if she stabbed me through the heart. It was a piece of my soul after all, why anyone would ever make themselves so vulnerable, is a bit hard to explain if you just aren't feeling it. I guess, fall in love sometime and you might understand why. Or stab yourself in the heart, the feeling is similar.

And that was the end of it. My master plan. Or rather the end of the final stage, I guess. I still had to personally apologize and get back to actually being friends, but at this point in time it was out of my hands, at least for 48 hours or so, and so for the first time in two whole weeks, I felt myself relax a little bit. And my God, it felt amazing. Sure, I was still thinking of the letters every waking second, but I was still relaxed. Contradictory, I know, but it was more of a physiological thing than a mental thing, as in, I had been walking around in flight or fight mode for the last two weeks, and at long last, my Adderall had finally seemed to have worn off. Or something like that.

So, I spent the next two days doing a whole lot of nothing, or to be more specific, nothing really worth mentioning. I won't pretend like I wasn't eagerly waiting for some kind of resolution to the letters. In fact, so was pretty much everyone. At least a dozen or so students had approached me since Monday, asking about the letters and what was written in them. I had politely responded that it was none of their business, but this seemed to fuel the rumor machine even more, and at the end of the second day, I was either a German Spy (they were probably forgetting what century it was), a witness in a protection program (true, I was witness to Ryan's constant abuse of the delicious cereal, Coco Pops), or I was terminally ill, and wanted to tell my friends only in writing. The last of these was easily the most messed up, and not even a particularly juicy rumor. Just dark.

But anyhow, as eager as these people were to find out what was in the letters, I was crazy eager to find out how they'd been received. I didn't really know how to precipitate the reaction, I had considered just walking straight up to Evan or one of the others, but I didn't want to jump the gun and ruin the process. So, I told myself I'd wait till the end of the third day before having to approach anyone directly. Luckily, I didn't have to wait that long.

---

"Hey Arlo." I dropped the book I was reading, literally, and looked up at Evan. His expression was still mostly blank, but it was impossible to overlook the airy friendliness he projected. He was neutral if anything. My heart started racing. It was only the first break of the third day and I hadn't expected anyone to come up to me. I was extremely glad, don't get me wrong, just taken aback.

"Hey Evan, man! How have you been?" I asked, trying to keep my voice indifferent without the excitement exploding in my brain.

"Not bad, not bad" he mumbled. "You?"

"Yeah not too bad, not too bad."

Well, this was awkward. I hadn't expected there to be chitchat, so I wasn't really prepared. A hundred times I'd gone over possible conversations, each time being able to flawlessly deliver my well-versed apology. But no scenarios had involved chitchat. He should have emailed me how this was going to go down. Or sent an owl, something to warn me about chitchat, come on.

"So, I guess we should talk about the letter" said Evan, sitting down beside me on the bench and moving on from the chit chat. I nodded my head and spoke at double speed.

“Yeah that would be great! Do you want to start or should I?” I asked, probably a little too eager.

“Well I just want to make sure I understood it all right. Well the explanation part. We *all* kind of want to know if we understood it right.” Evan paused and waited for me to say something. I didn’t, so he continued. “You’re basically saying that you said the things you did, not because of the DMT, but because you have a pretty dark and messed up id? And the DMT provoked the darkness to come out?”

“Yes. I didn’t say the things I did because of the DMT. I said them because some fucked up part of me believed them on that night.”

“So, you don’t believe those things anymore?” Evan asked.

“In no way shape or form. I don’t even think I was ever convinced of them, but I do think the dark part of me used them for some reaction. I guess I just didn’t expect to get the reaction I did, which is why it ended up destroying me.” Evan listened intently as I spoke, and I could see that he was going through a bunch of options in his head. For a while he said nothing, so neither did I.

“You know you really said some messed up shit to all of us, Arlo. Especially to me and my sister. You say that because of the DMT you can’t really remember exactly what you said. And I can tell you that you’re all the better off for it. It would probably haunt you, what you said.” I looked away, full of shame, and thought of a way to respond.

“I know I messed up. I’m still coming to terms with the fact that I did what I did. But I don’t want to leave Cape Town with this mistake still looming over me. Maybe I’m dumb, thinking that you guys will forgive me and give me another chance. And to be honest, I probably don’t deserve it. But I’m still asking, because to be frank, you guys are the best thing that’s ever happened to me. And I’m not going to throw that away without a fight.”

Evan nodded slowly and smiled at me. He didn’t smile at what I had said, though I guess in a way he did, but he smiled *right* at me. And shit, that felt amazing. I suddenly felt the weight of the world lift from my shoulders. It was all going to be OK. For some unknown reason, someone was smiling down on me today, and that somebody was telling me that my chance had finally come. That I actually deserved to be given one more chance. I felt like the luckiest man alive.

“That’s what I’d thought you’d say. Well, more like that’s what we *all* thought you’d say. I think it’s time for you to come back to the field. Join the gang again.” He winked as he stood up, waiting for me.

I stood up, slinging my bag across my back and getting ready to get back to the old days. And yet, I couldn’t quite believe it just yet. The torment that had begun, was over? Just like that, just as quickly as it had begun, it had crumbled? What on earth was this world that we were living on? How stuffed we all are...

“You really have no more questions? Everyone’s cool with it now?” I asked.

Evan started walking with me in tow. The awkwardness of earlier on had melted into a puddle and evaporated with our short conversation.

“Questions, no. Your letters were actually really well written. They explained everything really well. I definitely wouldn’t have believed all of that in a face to face conversation, so well played by writing it down. Kind of forced me to actually think about it.” I smiled when he said it. It was exactly the reason why I’d even written the letters in the first place. I knew what a conversation about DMT and the id would sound like. I’d taken part in a conversation exactly like it just the week before and though I’d been completely open to the very concept, I doubted that my friends would have responded the same.

“There is one thing though, so keep in mind that after all the shit that you said, it’s pretty epic that you managed to convince us of giving you another chance.” We were approaching the group at a rapid pace now and were almost upon them. I could see them all, smiling and laughing with each other, and to my absolute and unbounded delight, their expressions did not change when they noticed me walking with Evan. “My sister hasn’t quite forgiven you yet. Dylan told me he told you at least a part of what you said to her, but you’ll have to give her some more time. Just be happy you have the chance and take it as it comes.” I heard what he said but wouldn’t realize the full implications till the second last day of my career at Bergford.

I was a bundle of joy. I must have been humming. They welcomed me back with open arms, like actually, everyone hugged me, even Emily, so the fact that she hadn’t forgiven me completely yet was something I was willing to live with. I mean after all, time was a luxury I could now allow myself to enjoy. At least to an extent. I still had a full week of school left after this one, plenty of party choices for the weekend and above all, I had my friends back. So, *why* shouldn’t I just live a little?

## Chapter 27: Ten hours but only one small chance

The four of us stood in front of the door and waited for the clock to strike 08:00. The atmosphere was grim, to put it as simply as possible, kind of in the way that you can just feel that something bad and unpleasant was going to happen. It lingered in the air, this feeling, and neither Brian Clift, Adam Larrington or Eric the eighth-grade legend, could muster up any smart comments to help the situation.

“What’s the longest you guys have ever had detention for?” asked Eric. His voice was meager, without his friends to support him now, he seemed to be a lot more unsure of himself. He was of course the youngest here, and something in his voice told me he’d never been flung into the hell that is detention before.

“Three hours” said Clift.

“Three hours” said Larrington.

“Three hours” I said, nodding my head bleakly in agreement.

“So why do we get five? Is that even allowed?” asked Eric sounding annoyed.

The other two laughed and shook their heads in disbelief. “It doesn’t matter if it’s allowed. Cliffords does what she wants. Officially the most is three hours, but the most she’s ever forced one student to do at once was six. A matric who graduated last year. Slit her tires right before school was out. Apparently, she couldn’t prove it was him, so she just gave him a shit ton of detention for contempt and defiance.” It was Clift who answered Eric before taking out his phone to check the time. Two more minutes.

“What am I going to do for five hours though? That’s so long!” moaned Eric.

“It’s not the time that’s the worst with Cliffords,” started Larrington darkly, “It’s the anthem. If you’re lucky, you don’t know Nkosi sikelel iafrika yet. If you do, you’re shit out of luck.”

With this, I felt as perplexed as Eric looked, but didn’t feel like asking just before the start of the punishment. I tried to prep myself mentally, for what was to come, thinking ahead to the party I was going to tonight at Evan’s house, and telling myself that I just had to survive these ten *short* hours, to have my surely, last chance with Emily.

Over the past week, she had seemed to grow a lot warmer towards me and though it still didn’t seem as though she’d forgiven me quite yet, I was planning on getting her alone tonight for a one-on-one conversation. Sure, I still wanted to hook up with her, obviously, I was more in love

with this girl than I was with bacon, but given the time constraints of the situation, her forgiveness was something of infinite value to me.

You see, when I had mentioned before that I finally had some time to enjoy, I was more than grievously mistaken. Just two days before, I had come to learn that Evan and Emily would be leaving the day after today. So, the Friday, right after school was finished, they would fly to France to visit their father. And I had been a fool to not even expect it. Evan had always told me that that's what they did most holidays, but for some crippling reason, probably due to my over the top happiness at getting my friends back, I had ignored this completely and taken things slow. Too slow.

The door burst open and my thoughts were interrupted. There stood Cliffords, the biggest and ugliest grin spread pretty much across her whole face. "Good morning delinquents! Come on in and grab a seat. Leave an empty chair on each side of you. I won't have you fondling each other in *my* detention!" The remaining life that had been there to accompany the three of us to our sentencing was suddenly sucked up and replaced by a complete and utter sense of doom.

We shuffled into the room, one by one, taking a chair well away from the others. Cliffords walked up to the black board and wrote up three different times. *Start – 08:00, Finish 1 – 13:00, Finish 2 – 18:00*. When she had finished writing I noticed that the other three were staring at me, mouths literally open wide. I guess I should have taken that as a hint, that ten hours was something of a rare occurrence even at Bergford, but I simply shrugged my shoulders and tried to act coy.

"You may be wondering why Mr. Schreiber will be sitting here till 6 six o clock. And it's quite simple. He's the one who wrote the poem." Cliffords had sat down on the chair behind her desk and started eating a despicable looking breakfast yoghurt. I should have left the comment fly, but I didn't feel like having the other three hate me because I actually had gotten them into the position they were in.

"Ma'am, I've told you before, I didn't –" Cliffords jumped out of her chair and threw a piece of chalk at me so quickly that my brain barely had enough time to process what was happening.

"Open your mouth again and I'll give you another ten hours for tomorrow!" she settled back down in her chair and continued munching on her yoghurt. "As I was saying, Mr. Schreiber is the reason you three are sitting here today, apart from the obvious fact that you're all little runts." She put her yoghurt down and proceeded to take something from the drawer beside her desk. She

placed an average sized subwoofer on the table and switched it on. “For those of you who have never been fortunate enough to serve detention with me, it will not be just staring at bricks the whole time. I actually think this time should be more than just a reflection, especially if you have ten hours, so you might as well actually learn something. Detention begins *now*” She pressed what I assumed to be the play button on her computer, and suddenly the room was filled with one of the most beautiful songs ever written. At least it was beautiful for the first hour, maybe even the second and the third. Nkosi sikelel iafrika, the South African national anthem. Made up of three different languages to represent the diversity of cultures in South Africa. Who would have thought that Ms. Cliffords would be such a patriot?

It only took me three hours to figure out that she wasn’t. In fact, Ms. Cliffords was a lot more twisted than I could have ever given her credit for. Hour after hour, she sat there, eating her yoghurt, or Biltong, or some kind of snacks, while listening to her own music playing over the headphones she was wearing. She spent a solid 80% of the time actually watching us, every now and then ordering us to sit straighter or to stay awake.

But the musical torture was something straight out of Guantanamo Bay. I genuinely wished my eardrums would pop. I was luckier than the others because I hadn’t known the song so well, so I actually managed to entertain myself for the first hour, teaching myself the words and silently singing along in my head. But after the words came freely to me, it became the most torturous experience of my life. And there was no physical pain, nothing. It’s hard to explain how effective mental distress can be. How it numbs you but also burns you alive until you’d rather claw your own skin off than be exposed any longer.

And counting the bricks was utterly impossible. Every time you thought you had a solid count, the languages of the song would change and by God it was hard to ignore. Transitioning from Xhosa to Afrikaans to English, all in the space of one song, was enough to destroy your attention entirely. But then, five hours were up. They went by a lot quicker than I’d actually anticipated, so I guess there was something ‘positive’ about the torture method. Anything that made the time go faster was a blessing in detention. But unfortunately, at the five-hour mark, it also meant that I was the last boy standing. This is where it got hard. I finally hit a brick wall, and time became a thick and sluggish liquid, moving an inch whenever it felt like it.

I did the math a few months later because believe it or not I still dreamt of that day for a good year following the actual day. I would wake up in the middle of the night, unable to get rid

of the singing voices in my head. And I only had to do it for ten hours. Imagine the hell torture victims go through, 100 hours on end, music, sleep deprivation. I guess in that way I was still pretty lucky. But I still listened to the song about 200 times on that day. 200 times the exact same song was repeated, the exact same rhythm, the exact same tune. This isn't something you can just make up. Cliffords had specialized her technique of brutalizing life. She had a special way and she was damned good at it too.

By the time I was finally done, I literally couldn't hear a word that she was saying. I didn't even notice that she had turned the music off until she walked over to my desk and slapped her hand down with a sharp crack.

"Get out Mr. Schreiber! Your punishment is done! Stop wasting my time!" shouted Ms. Cliffords. She was laughing to herself like a little schoolgirl, so I grabbed my bag and sprinted out of the room, leaving the lunatic behind me for the last time. I never looked back, but the image of her unkind face is forever burned into my eyes like a searing brand.

In my disturbed state I seemed to drift through the hallways. It was still light outside which was normal for the South African summer, but there were barely any students no matter where I looked. It was six o'clock on a Thursday afternoon after all, but more specifically the Thursday before the end of year. Everyone had a place to be, probably some party or another, including me as a matter of fact.

Despite my clear purpose, I thought about nothing for quite a long time. Usually I'd listen to music if I was travelling somewhere, but for obvious reasons I didn't want to hear anything, let alone put earphones in my ears. I just wanted to hear the nature, birds chirping, leaves rustling in the weak breeze.

When I hear the anthem now, I'm largely over it. As in, I can enjoy it without the hairs on my back standing up, but I still think back to those ten hours I served. And more importantly, I use it as a reminder that there are some truly fucked up people in the world. Ms. Cliffords being one of them.

I got in one of the taxis heading towards Evan's house and didn't say a word. Dylan who was sitting next to me was trying to strike up a conversation but gave up when he noticed how quiet I was. I smiled meekly, trying to signal that I wasn't an asshole, just not in the mood, but I never figured out if he noticed or not. When the taxi stopped, I hopped out, handing my four Rand

to the driver in the front. Money was the non-verbal thank you and the taxi still had a long way to drive till Wynberg, so the driver took off not waiting for me to say anything.

I stood in front of Evan's house. There was music coming from inside, though I doubted that there would be a lot of people there already. I tried to remind myself of the importance of this night. That I could mope around and cry about the detention after tomorrow, even later tonight for all I cared, but for now I had to focus on Emily. It had been three months after all, and in those three months I had spent twenty minutes on a bed with her, had almost hooked up with her but then called her a whore and then barely salvaged the situation with all my might and effort. And it had all come down to this. So, fuck you, Ms. Cliffords. Tonight, was still my time to shine.

---

Evan opened the door with an enormous smile. Like most students of Bergford who didn't take art as an elective, he'd written his last exam just hours before, and if there was anything he wanted to do most with his newfound freedom, it was drink. That is to stay, his breath reeked of alcohol!

"Whatsup man! Want to sing the national anthem with me?" He didn't sound very drunk, but I could see that sparkle in his eyes which let me know he'd definitely been drinking for an hour already.

"I think I'd rather hang myself, nothing against you. If you had a gun, that would be quicker" I replied, walking inside and following him to the kitchen. He handed me an ice-cold castle light from the freezer and quickly finished his open one. Then he took a second for himself and snapped it open motioning to me that a clink was required. We toasted to the end of the year and our 'new'-found friendship and took a long swig. Immediately the cool liquid eased its way gently down my throat and I found myself grinning for the first time since that morning. Everything just felt right, to be standing here with Evan, to celebrate this last day in proper style. I would even be so bold to call it perfect.

"So how bad is ten hours? I never really thought an exchange student would be the one to set the Bergford detention record" said Evan, still swigging away at his beer. I laughed at the compliment and took another sip from my own.

“It was probably the worst ten hours of my life. No joke. Haunting. Like I don’t think I could listen to that song anymore without wanting to run for my life. What is the actual record?” I asked.

“Ten hours, in one sitting. Did you think I was joking?”

I said nothing. This had to be classic Evan, he was just playing with me, surely. “You have to be joking. There’s no way I could hold the record?”

Evan laughed, shaking his head. “You better believe it my friend. You’re officially a Bergford legend now, and I doubt anyone will break that record so quickly. I guess your poem really hit the old hag in the bag!” He finished the rest of his beer and got another one out. I wasn’t even half way done with my first, so it was clear that Evan had a private agenda for the evening. And it probably involved getting roaringly intoxicated.

I let his words sink in. It was incredulous, and not quite without shame either. There were three Schreiber’s at Bergford High School. Two identical twins, and their younger cousin who only attended the school for an exchange of three months. While the former two would be remembered for academic excellence and even sporting achievements, the latter would be remembered for setting the school detention record and making the Tennis reserve team. (That happened, I spent 800 Rand on Tennis shoes, then proceeded to qualify for the reserve team).

“Well shit, she really didn’t like that poem, did she?” I said, only half serious. Evan laughed and cleared his throat.

“Sounds like she needs some dicking!” he said.

“Eager with legs open wide” I continued.

“To see her get down licking” Evan finished as we both burst out laughing. I managed to finish my own beer and take a new one from the freezer, making a mental note that it was my second. I had no problems with enjoying myself tonight, and that included getting as drunk as I felt comfortable with, but I did still have something important to do.

“You know you’re going to have to recite it tonight, Arlo. We’ll make sure no one takes any videos or anything, but I doubt anyone else can perform it as well as the author!” He paused, then clinked his can with mine and added, “And you do need to be shitfaced for the performance. Otherwise you might seem like an asshole.” He winked and punched me playfully on the shoulder.

The doorbell rung, and Evan hurried over to answer it. Dylan, Grace, Layla and Emily had arrived, also seemingly tipsy, giggling as they stumbled through the hallway to the kitchen. They

all gave me a hug and greeted me, making some lude comment or something about my detention. Dylan was probably the funniest, asking me if I wanted to practice Xhosa with him, now that I knew a few words.

I told him no, so he responded by calling me an ‘iHawki iSpasitiki’, which he claimed, hand on his heart was the direct translation for a spastic hawk in Xhosa.

Once we were all seated around the kitchen table, Evan handed out glasses so that we could continue drinking with a little bit of extra formality. The beer was soon abandoned as vodka and Sprites were handed out, containing what can only be defined as feeble amounts of ice, *and* Sprite for that matter.

The conversation turned into an electric buzz, not entirely stemming from the flowing alcohol, but from the estimation and guesses what everyone had for their yearly marks. They would be sent out next Monday, though sending them out only counted for Evan and Emily, whereas the rest of the students would have to visit the school one last time in the holidays to receive their marks. It was a typical high school experience, one I knew from back home in Berlin and one I was sure to experience again in only a matter of months. The guessing part was the fun part, even though it changed a whole lot of nothing. It was ultimately out of our control, but talking, and hypothesizing made it seem like they had some influence, and that was worth it a thousand times over.

“So, where’s your sister?” asked Layla, looking over at me. “I’m asking for Arlo.” My cheeks flushed hot with embarrassment, the joke would seemingly never become old. Everyone around the table laughed.

“Last night, Arlo. Better make it count,” said Grace.

“You’re not even a quarter drunk of how drunk you need to be!” exclaimed Clara.

“So, you want him to puke on my sister?” asked Evan jokingly. There was a fresh round of laughter as Clara looked away embarrassed, realizing that her joke had not quite been delivered as planned.

“But anyways, she’s pre-drinking at Mia’s place with the girls. They’re going to come over at like 21:00 or so, so till then, we’ve got Arlo’s full and undivided attention! And he’s got a show planned for us!” He winked at me again, ignoring the fact that I was rolling my eyes and mouthed the word *dicking* to me. I smiled even though I tried not to and gave a weak laugh.

So, we continued drinking, collectively deciding that until 21:00 we had to get record level drunk. The alcohol flowed as more and more guests arrived. By 20:30 the place was packed, with easily a good thirty or forty people dancing to the vocal deep house music bleeding through the speakers. It was definitely amusing to watch, even more so as I got more and more drunk and when I joined in to dance I finally realized that I had accidentally managed to break two records in one day, one for detention and one for alcohol consumption that didn't end in puking.

I danced hard, probably like a fool, but it was hard to care when everything was spinning all around you, people were cheering you on and the emotions were running high.

As I took a small break, I looked over to where Evan was standing with Hannah and had an almost retching sense of déjà vu wash over me as I was reminded of that night almost two weeks ago. I sat down taking a sip of a glass of water. Shocker, I spit out the ghastly liquid into the sink and took a whiff of the 'glass of water'. Pure vodka, why was I even surprised. I emptied the glass and refilled it with water, annoyed that I had taken a sip of anything without knowing what it was. Hadn't I learnt anything?

"Arlo, can you do it now?" I turned my head to see Evan standing there, Hannah was gone, and he was handing me another beer. I tried to shake my head and say no to the beer, but just as easy as that would have been, it was apparently easier to just accept the ice-cold liquid and start drinking it with a generous chug.

"Fuck yeah I'm ready!" I shouted, raising my fist to the air with a gesture that was eerily similar to a call for white power. "Wait, what am I ready for?"

"Classic, you dipshit!" Evan laughed, shaking his head. "The poem man. We're going to turn off the music, then you get up on the kitchen table and let rip your masterpiece!"

I took out my phone to check out the time. 20:55. I did some math in my head. It took five seconds longer than it should have, but I was able to conclude with confidence that Emily should not be arriving for at least another five minutes.

"Yeah, let's do it now" I responded. I didn't really need much time for deductive reasoning. I was drunk, possibly too drunk to have a serious conversation with Emily, but I was not too drunk to realize that it would be best if I did my little performance, *before* Emily showed up.

The music was turned off and there was bunch of shushing from each side. I hauled myself up onto the table, I won't lie, it took me three attempts with ample amounts of wobbling, but when I finally stood, I stood firm and ready to perform. The room had gone completely silent. Again, I

was reminded of that night just two weeks ago, when a similar silence had briefly taken hold as I was flung into an alternative, DMT driven universe. And then I started to speak, worry free and suddenly calm.

“An ode to the milkiest cow in town” the verses came out songlike, I was like a blackbird soaring high in the early morning, commanding my art to everyone, everywhere. And by God, they loved every single word I had written. Especially the dicking verse, a verse which lacked true artistic flavor, but made up for it in its ability of conjuring up a room full of laughter. They didn’t even care that I was reading it off the paper before me.

“I wish I had a knife for her skull. Fuck you, Ms. Cliffords!” I finished the poem by chugging the rest of my beer, much to the pleasure of the now applauding crowd. It was thunderous, the applause, I’m not even exaggerating. Whether all the people here even knew that I was the author, or whether they just thought it was a bloody good show, they clapped in unison for a solid minute, allowing me to climb down from the table. I was bombarded by compliments, a stream of them coming from all directions.

“That was hilarious dude! You should be an actor!” I think that was Will.

“I can’t believe you wrote this. It’s genius!” That was Kayley.

“How did you only get four hours from this? It was dope!” Adrian I think.

I reminded myself, as hard as it was, that I did not write the poem for admiration from other students. I didn’t write it because of a performance opportunity. I wrote it to get my friends back, and so I didn’t let a single comment go to my head, out of the sheer terror that I could throw it all away again. Arrogance is funny that way. It’s great till it tears you a new asshole, but once it’s given you that second shitter, you sure as hell won’t forget the poison it comes with.

Someone slapped me gently on the back, so I knew it was Evan before I’d even turned around. There were actual tears in his eyes, not like someone died and he was crying about it tears, but the kind that sprouted from your eyes when you’ve been laughing way too hard.

“That was brilliant, you crazy son of a bitch. Class act man,” he paused, wiping his eyes and taking on a frown. “You know I’m really going to miss you man.”

His words hit me in the gut and before I knew it, tears were forming in my eyes as well, but those tears were tears of sadness, not laughter. He laughed when he saw me dabbing at my eyes and took me by the arm, pulling gently.

“We can cry and do all that shit at the airport tomorrow. For now, we still need to get blasted, so we forget about it all!” He dragged me into the dancing crowd which was back in full swing. I did what I had done before my performance, or what I think I did because honestly, I still didn’t really know how to dance, and making awkward movements that accidentally sometimes gelled with the beat was not what I would call dancing. Some things would never change I guess. And me learning to dance was probably one of them.

The time passed quickly as we danced into the night and before I knew it an hour had gone by. I told Evan I was getting a drink and approached the kitchen table once again. I emptied a glass this time, not really caring for what had been in it or who’s it had been and filled it up with some sprite and vodka. The dancing had surprisingly sobered me up quite a bit, nowhere near to completely, but given that this was going to be a long evening, I had decided to continue drinking nonetheless.

I took out my phone again, taking a sip from my drink and stared at the clock. 22:15. I think the guy who came up with ‘time flies when you’re having fun’, actually meant ‘time flies when you’re as drunk as a sailor’, and only made the PG-13 version so people would remember his name. The irony being, I hadn’t learnt his name let alone remembered it now, so he might as well have kept it with its original intended vulgarity.

I turned my attention to the people in the crowd. Somewhere out there, amongst all the faces, was the girl of my dreams. There was no way they were later than an hour, that would just be rude even for South African standards, but still the task loomed before me of actually finding her. It was now or never. Forever be the fool or take my balls and go.

I actually took my balls in my hand for a moment, not because they were itchy, but because I thought of it as a sign of strength. Emily did not as she walked over to me with a smile on her face which quickly morphed into a slightly disgusted look as she noticed where my hand was. Hmm. Not the best way to start this conversation.

“Hey, Emily!” I shouted at her, letting go of my balls and trying to play it off as though nothing had happened. I gave her a hug which she thankfully accepted.

“Hey, Arlo. How were the ten hours? I’m guessing you don’t want to sing the anthem anytime soon” she replied. I forced myself to laugh, resulting in what might have been the fakest laugh I’d ever heard. My heart sunk. This was not going well.

“Well let’s just say I’m happy it’s done! And to be honest, I’m pretty tempted to kidnap Zuma just so he’ll change the national anthem. I mean how hard can it be?” I decided to relax and let the alcohol talk for me. I was going off on the hope that it would do a better job than me.

Emily laughed and smiled at me. It was a warm smile, but it was different than the smile she had reserved for me before the DMT incident. This smile was a lot friendlier than it was flirty, but I didn’t let that rattle my newly-found drunken confidence.

“Can we go somewhere to talk? About the letter?” I asked. I tried to pour some of the same emotions from the letter into my eyes, hoping that she would notice and fall endlessly into them. She nodded her head and made space for me to lead the way. So, I did, but I didn’t take her hand. My heart was beating faster than a psytrance track and as I looked at her I knew that she was like a gazelle to me on that night, like the first night almost. I was so afraid of scaring her off, engaging with her was like putting each individual toe one at a time into the bath, testing the waters again and again. Which was ironic, I mean I was super drunk, so I shouldn’t really have cared. Gone all out in fact. But yet here I was, more intoxicated by the girl following behind me than the liters of ethanol flowing in my blood.

I approached the same room we had been in two weeks ago. Once again it was empty, the lights were off and the couch looked so inviting. So, I went and sat down and waited patiently for Emily to join me. And she did.

“So, what do you want to talk about?” she asked. She looked unsure as she gazed into my eyes, as if she was trying to figure out what my angle was. Or, maybe she knew what it was and was rather trying to figure out if I was stupid enough to still pursue it.

“Well, I wanted to ask if you understood everything I wrote. Was there anything unclear, or did you have any questions?” I could have imagined it, but I swear that she flinched. Ever so slightly, like it barely happened, but just the mention of the letter had poked her in some way.

“It was very clear, Arlo. I understood everything, there’s no doubt about it. I just really don’t know how to respond. I mean, how did you expect me to respond to a letter like that?” she asked. I smiled at that. It was a genuine smile, because of course I’d thought about it before. The millions of different ways that she could interpret it, the million more ways how she could respond.

“I honestly don’t know. But I sure am happy you read it” I said simply. She laughed at this, punching me playfully on the arm.

“You complete idiot, Arlo. Of course I’d read the letter. I would have missed out if I hadn’t. Even if I don’t know how to respond, I don’t think I’ve ever read something so beautiful.” She turned her head as she said this, staring at the empty white wall just above the television.

“So, do you forgive me? For the things I said? I would take them back in a heartbeat if I could, I’d do another twenty hours of detention if it would absolve me from what I did, I’d —” I started to blabber a bit, the slurring of my words shining through a little too strongly.

“Of course, I forgive you, Arlo. I’ve forgiven you ever since I read that letter. The only reason I’ve been acting kind of weird is that it’s killing me that I haven’t responded yet. Or rather, worse still is that I don’t really know how to respond.”

“Thank you” I whispered. She turned back to face me, her eyes stabbing into mine as she bore a look of surprise.

“Why are you thanking me?” she asked.

I smiled again, hopelessly. If this wasn’t a scene from every RomCom movie ever, then I clearly had way too high expectations. “Because, Emily, your forgiveness is the most important thing in the world for me right now. If you believe everything you read in the letter, and believe me, it *is* all true, then maybe you can understand. You mean everything to me, Emily, and so does your forgiveness.” Her eyes softened, glistening under the artificial lighting of the room.

“I don’t know if I can just pretend that it never happened. The things you said. I mean I want to, really, especially after the letter, I want things to go back to how they were in this very room before you fucked it all up. I do. And I understand what happened, and I understand that you really would undo it if you could. But how can I pretend?”

“You can’t,” I was taken aback by what I had said, this was definitely not part of the plan, this was going to be the worst lead in to a kiss, ever, “and you shouldn’t.” The words were out of my mouth before I could even conceptualize them.

And well, that was the truth, what I had said, as I look back upon that night now, I know I could have lied. Seriously, I could have said something super entrancing, something to win the moment, something like, “Well maybe you can pretend, just for one night”, or, “You’ll never know what might have been if you don’t pretend just for one night”, I mean the list is literally endless. But, I stuck with the truth. And for three years now I’ve debated with myself whether it was the right thing to do. No, that’s wrong. It was definitely the *right* thing to do, but I have been debating whether telling the truth was the best thing for me in that moment. So, I guess, dear reader, you

can be proud of me for doing the right thing. Or you can hate me, for throwing away the single last chance I ever had with Emily. It's up to you. Hate me or love me, Emily appreciated the truth far more than an elaborate ploy. How did I know? I could see it in her eyes, how else? Well that, and, she said it.

"You're being completely honest, aren't you?" she asked.

"I am." I responded simply, two words that sealed my fate.

"You know, I actually thought you were going to try and hook up with me, one last time. But, you did kind of just tell me that if I can't bring myself to feel that way again, I can't, and I don't have to?" she asked. I nodded my head and smiled and so did she. And she threw her arms around me and gave me a warm hug, before letting go and saying, "You're a really great friend, Arlo. I'm so happy we had this talk."

OK, yes, I say I did the right thing, and I did, but future Arlo still beats up this idiotic version of Arlo on a daily basis. This drunken moron managed to friendzone the love of his life, the last time he was going to see her for the next three years. Not figuratively, but literally. How, how on earth can anyone do that? Especially knowing what he knows? That this is the one person in the world that you actually would jump off a cliff for, and you got her to friendzone you.

"So am I" is what I stammered. The admittance to the friendzone was a surprise, even if I'd caused it myself, and in that moment, then and there, I was finally at a loss for words. Luckily Emily came to the rescue, taking my hand and dragging me back outside the room towards the group of dancers. Faces stared at me with hope, Evan gazed at me with raised eyebrows, questioning if my voyage had come to an end.

And as I danced late into the night, with Emily and Evan and the rest of the gang, I realized that yes, my voyage had come to an end. I hadn't quite landed anywhere, but I had definitely traveled for miles and miles. So, we danced. Very late into the night. I was staying at Evan's and didn't have to worry about being picked up by Stephan or Theresa, so after my conversation with Emily, I stopped holding back with the alcohol (hadn't really been holding back but it sounds better and makes me sound less like an alcoholic), and got royally, brutally smashed.

And I don't know if it was good or bad. Sober or drunk, more sleep or less sleep, a full stomach or an empty stomach, nothing could have prepared me for the following day, a day which I to this day still define as the worst day of my life. And that's saying something. I've had ups and downs, lots of *pretty* bad days, but nothing really compared to that last Friday. It haunts me still.

## Chapter 28: Fly away troubles, fly

I woke up with what was definitely the second worst hangover I'd ever experienced to that day, which was actually saying quite a lot given that the first had involved me waking up to puke more and then almost killing my brother and father in a car accident. So, I guess you could say it was fitting, that I would wake up on the worst day of my life with the second worst hangover. Life had a sick sense of humor. But I know that by now.

Evan farted loudly from the bed to my right. I was lying on a somewhat stiff pull out couch which had been crudely draped in a bed cover in our drunken states the night before. I grabbed the bottle of water lying on my left side and took a big long sip. It was an instantaneous reaction, the liquid cooled my throat and set about trying to hydrate the body of a sixteen-year-old corpse.

I picked up my phone and checked the time. 12:30. I sighed. Didn't Evan say that their flight was at 17:00?

"Dude, what time's your flight?" I asked, throwing my water bottle at Evan's side. It found its target and woke the sleeping giant.

"What the fuck man? Let me sleep!" He grumbled, turning his back on me and throwing the bottle behind him. I caught it and tried again.

"What time does your flight leave man?" I asked with a higher volume this time, thinking that that may have been the problem. He turned around to face me and weakly lifted his eyelids. Then his eyes focused on me and the phone in my hand and connected the dots quicker than I could ask again.

"16:20 man," I laughed wanting to interrupt him but he continued, "No man seriously. 16:20, I thought it was hilarious when I booked it. But now, please, let me die in peace." I laughed at the big lump of a man and left the water bottle lying beside him. He would want it when he woke up. Evan had a crazily fast metabolism, and that extended to drinking an unholy amount of alcohol, but because he never puked, his hangovers were brutal. After a night like the last, he'd usually stay in bed till at least 13:00 (he still had half an hour), and then promptly wolf down as many Ibuprofen as his stomach could handle.

I got up and pulled a t-shirt over my bare chest and headed out of the room. Emily's door was closed even though I could hear talking from behind it. The girls had gone to sleep a bit earlier than Evan, Dylan and myself, so it wasn't really surprising that they were up, but it was unusual for the door to be closed if they were all awake.

I ignored the peculiarity and walked onwards to the kitchen, remembering the night before and my conversation with Emily. Although a great weight had been lifted from my shoulders, and the outcome was actually a lot better than it could have gone, I was annoyed at not having tried one last time, just to close the chapter. For me, it was still open, yes, she was flying in literally less than four hours, but nonetheless, I wasn't quite there yet with being completely done with the situation.

I poured myself a glass of orange juice, topped it up with a hefty amount of ice, and poured myself a bowl of cereal. There I sat for the following half an hour, enjoying my Friday morning cereal and realizing that I had just missed the last day of school at Bergford High School. I shrugged off the thought, I mean how important can one day really be, especially the last day of the year. Sarcasm. I wish I'd gone to school that day.

“Morning dude.” I looked up from my cereal bowl to see Evan walk through the doorway with the bottle of water. His eyes were bleary, and he hadn’t bothered to put anything on but a pair of shorts, but he already looked better than he had half an hour ago.

“Morning man. May I recommend the orange juice a la cereal?” I asked, trying my best to feign a French accent.

“Jesus Christ, never ever try to speak French again, that’s how you kill a language my boy! But yes, that is what I’ll be having, thanks for offering up my menu” he shouted, shaking his head and laughing. I chuckled as he got himself a bowl and an orange juice and sat across from me, observing the mess from the night before. “I can’t believe I have to pack *and* clean this mess in the next hour. Emily better do something as well!”

“She’s already up and so are the girls, so I assume they’ll be ready to clean” I said.

“You’d expect women to always be ready to clean. It’s a damn shame it’s almost never the case!” I laughed out loud at his ridiculous statement, realizing just how much I was going to miss my friend. “And they didn’t even cook breakfast. *Peasants.*” A fresh round of laughter escaped from my mouth and this time Evan grinned and joined in.

“Are you sexist pigs making jokes about women making breakfast again? Because, I don’t see any breakfast for me!” exclaimed Layla, joining the table after grabbing a bowl and glass. “Oh, and good morning I guess.”

We grumbled a greeting back, trying to hide our smirks behind our glasses of orange juice, horribly failing and putting on a rather spastic show of events. Dylan, Grace and Emily soon joined

us at the table, mimicking the rest of us with a glass of cool orange juice and a bowl of cereal. As far as I could tell in this point in time, Emily was now the only one missing, and though it really wasn't any of my business, I didn't want her to miss her flight. I mean, obviously she wouldn't, I don't know what kept nagging me to rub my nose in a place it shouldn't have been rubbed, but I did it anyways. Logic doesn't really mean anything in a real-life situation. You can try and apply it, but when you're in love with someone, logic melts away faster than flesh in a crematorium, and it becomes just, another word.

"Where's Emily?" I asked innocently. I expected the laughter and mock annoyance to explode around the table as it usually did when I asked about her, but on this morning, nothing happened. Maybe, I should have taken the hint, I mean, everyone was hungover, it could have just been that everyone was hungover and not in the physical mood to entertain me. But I *had* to notice the awkward shifting, the weirdness of the silence. "Has she packed already?" At this point I was honestly confused, I didn't suspect anything of course, in my eyes it would have been impossible to see this coming, especially given the conversation just the night before.

"Didn't you guys talk last night?" asked Layla. Her question received dirty looks from the other girls in the room, but as far as I could tell, Evan and Dylan were as clueless as I was.

"We did. But what does that have to do with her flight?" I asked. I shouldn't have. I should have just said yes and left it at that. But I kept pushing, maybe because I wanted to know, or maybe it's simply because I'm just a self-destructive teenage boy. Whatever it was, I did keep pushing.

"Well, yeah, she's done her packing and cleaning her room and stuff. We helped her this morning." Grace answered this time.

"Well that's good, isn't it?" I asked.

"Yeah, yeah it is!" replied Grace, relaxing a little in her chair as she took a sip from her orange juice. I did not relax. In fact, up to that point I'd been quite relaxed, but then something inside of me called out to me, warning me, putting me on high alert. Why were the girls treating the conversation as they were? I wasn't made of ice. They weren't going to shatter me. What weren't they telling me?

"So, why is she still in her room?" I asked. The innocence that had been thick and clear in my voice had suddenly disappeared completely and been replaced by an interrogative tone. Me and Emily had talked things through. Yes, I wasn't done with it, it would take me a while to be,

but for exactly this reason I'd talked to her last night. She didn't have to hide anything from me, nor did her friends. Actually, she didn't have to hide from me physically either.

The silence was awkward, annoyingly so, and I noticed now that Dylan and Evan had started acting similarly to the girls. They avoided my eyes furiously, trying to eat their cereal in peace before the war they were predicting broke out.

"What are you guys not telling me?" My voice was sterner now, almost unfriendly if I'm honest, but this whole situation was getting on my balls. Time was literally of the essence, and I wanted to see Emily before she left, I wanted to enjoy these last moments I had. So, I got up, intending to do just that and headed towards her room. "Fine, I'll just go and get her then."

It was Layla who finally scrambled up to grab me by the arm and stop me from going any further. Her eyes were pained, like she really didn't want to be the bearer of bad news, and as I wracked my brain again and again, I couldn't come to guess what on earth was going on. And I wouldn't have guessed it, even if I'd sat down for a few hours, run countless of different possibilities through my mind, I just wouldn't have come to the conclusion. And honestly, it was because I thought that Emily was better than this, that love would be better than this, that our cruel world would be even just a little bit better than this. But it's not, and that's the truth.

"Greg slept over last night, in the spare room. He's still... *talking* with her." Layla let go of my arm and gave me a hug. OK. Who was Greg? Seriously, I'd never even met Greg, I shit you not, my first encounter with him, ever, was on this day, the worst of my life.

The truth was still oblivious to me, but I'll be the first to admit that maybe at this point I'd already entered the stage of denial, the first stage of grief. To everyone else in the room the truth was more than obvious, and Dylan stood straight up to head to the freezer, where he retrieved a frosted bottle of Vodka and poured an obscene amount into my orange juice. I walked over to my seat and sat back down, taking a sip even though I couldn't process why I was drinking something so vile so early in the day.

"But I mean, why can't they talk here?" I asked, not really directing my question at anyone but really just throwing it out into the room with hopes that it would be taken up by someone. I must have sounded like a lost puppy dog, or if I hadn't managed to sound like it I surely must have looked like one. The confusion on my face was so juvenile, so pure and pathetic, it was clear that no one really knew how to deal with me.

"I don't think they're just talking, Arlo" said Dylan, who had come around from his side of the table to sit beside me. I looked at him when he said this, and when I saw his eyes, those blasted eyes filled with wisdom and love, I finally understood what was going on. My world came crashing down. And no, I'm not exaggerating. Betrayal and envy once again consumed me, but holy hell, the fires I now danced within were sheer monstrosities, making the pain I'd felt just two weeks before, feel like a walk in the park now.

I finished my glass of Orange and Vodka and Dylan proceeded to fill the cup as quickly as possible. I numbly drank, unable to utter a single word. My friends sitting around me were radiating care and love, I could feel it trying to console me, but nothing would be felt for a long time after that day.

"She said that you guys had talked about it, and that you were OK with it?" said Grace. I heard the words, but they meant nothing to me. And I'm glad I wasn't able to register them, because at that point I might have shouted and started breaking things. I know I've said it before, I'm not a violent person, but there are some emotions, some factors in life, that can flip you inside out, till the rawness of your very innards have been so brutally exposed that you'll do anything to feel any little emotion. But I was too numb for even that experience. I felt water trickle down my cheeks, maybe, I assumed they were tears but I lacked the energy to tell the difference between air and moisture.

Dylan filled my glass again. I drank it down in one big gulp. Years later I would come to discover, that the way I treated the experience that day, was exactly the way serial killer Jeffery Dahmer had tried to numb his darkness. Drink after drink, he'd been drunk through most of High School, and as I look back upon that day, as messed up as it is to say it, I can honestly relate to the way Jeffery felt. Anything was glorious, if it numbed the pain.

"Why don't you take him out for some breakfast at the café on the corner, Dylan? If he still feels like coming with to the airport, we'll pick you up with the Uber when we're ready to go." I think it was Evan who'd said the words, and it made sense that it was Evan, but again, I couldn't tell the difference. But I did notice that I was now suddenly walking, and then the front door went open and we were in the street, and then at some point I was sitting on a chair, holding a beer in my hand and drinking it a little too quickly. Had I not been so numb I might have noticed the displeasing looks from the other café goers around me, but I was numb, so I 'casually' drank my beer and continued to stare at the white tablecloth.

That was probably the most soothing thing for me, and it still is when bad things happen. The color white just speaks to me, or well, it doesn't. I can't tell which is better, how empty it is, or how full it can be. But in that moment, the white tablecloth was all I wanted to see, so, imagine my shock when I was suddenly blasted back to reality as a waiter put a big plate of scrambled eggs and bacon on my plate, obscuring my view of whiteness. I looked up at him and scowled.

The poor waiter was at a loss for words, so he clung onto the only weapon he possessed and pointed at the beer in my hand. "You are 18, right?" I nodded. "Isn't it a bit early for a beer?" I shook my head. I could see his Adams Apple protruding as he gulped and nodded his head. "Very well, enjoy the meal."

I actually have a lot of respect for service staff, given that I once had to waiter as a summer job. But on that day, I think I would have wrought hell upon everyone and everything. So, I guess I was in luck that it was perhaps the emptiest day I'd had in a while. I had wanted to go with to the airport, to say goodbye to Emily and Evan just before they left, but whether I was actually capable of doing so now, I had no idea. But I had no other plans, and that was great.

I finished my beer and ordered another by waving to the waiter and pointing at my beer. I quickly devoured the plate of tasteless calories before me and washed down most bites with more and more beer. I'd eaten at the café before, and it was good food, but again, nothing was good about that day. Dylan observed me as I moved about, doing my thing.

"Do you want to talk about it?" Dylan asked. I briefly looked up from my now empty plate, noticing that my new beer had been placed on the table. I took hold of it and continued drinking, then shook my head and looked back down.

"That's fine," he said simply, "do you think you'll still want to go to the airport?"

I said nothing for a while and let the motion of me drinking, do the talking. I knew I shouldn't go, through the numbness I could see that more danger awaited me, that it would just make it worse and in no ways better. But then again, I was also quite drunk. Drunk enough to say fuck it, one last time. And not because of love, I wish I could say that I made my decision because of the love, but no, I did it, because I wanted to say goodbye to my best friend properly, and I'd be found dead before his beautiful, perfect, sister would stop me.

My eyes teared up again and I instinctively grabbed my napkin to dab at them. She was still perfect, even if completely heartless, but I was going to go to that airport, if for any reason,

then to spite Emily. I wanted the last thing she'd see, to be me, unbroken. And even if that would be hard to accurately portray, there was no way I wasn't going to try.

"Yes." It was the first word I'd spoken in an hour and with tears streaming down my cheeks, I looked straight into Dylan's radiant eyes. He told me a few weeks later that my eyes were dead that day, as in that there was literally nothing left which could allude to a beating heart somewhere inside of me. And I don't doubt it, but regardless of what he saw, he nodded and called the waiter over. He paid with cash, tipping the waiter at least twenty percent from what I can remember, which is the least we could have done considering what a dick I'd been.

Dylan stood up and so did I. I followed him outside without a word and continued my vow of silence until a black Mazda pulled up just outside, Emily sitting in the front and Evan in the back. I wanted to run when I saw her sitting there, smiling as usual without a worry in the world. And that was probably the worst thing about it. She really didn't understand what she'd done. I could see it as she sat there, she saw absolutely nothing wrong about hooking up with some guy, the morning after me expressing my love for her, *again*. And it wasn't wrong because she couldn't feel the same way for me, I'd meant it when I said it, I didn't want to force her to feel anything she didn't really. But it was her complete lack of consideration, her absolute disregard for what her actions would do to me, mentally. Maybe she hadn't understood the letter, maybe I hadn't made it clear enough how in love I was with her.

But even then, she could have hidden it. She didn't need to tell me about it, she was her own person, but she did it right in front of me. I might have well have been in the room. And she never was able to see that. She was never able to see how much she had hurt me. And maybe it was because I kept on showering her with affection, even after that day. I gave, and I gave until I had nothing more to give, and when she couldn't take any more, that's when I was free. Pity it took three years and a flight to South Africa, but hey, shit happens.

Dylan opened the door and climbed into the middle, allowing me to sit on the left side of the back, right behind Emily. It was a small strategic move, but it meant so much for that short car ride. I managed to say nothing the entire way. Evan looked at me a few times and I tried to weakly smile back, but he didn't say anything to me either. And neither did Emily or Dylan.

But the Uber driver, was the Jesus of Taxis, and noticing very quickly that no one was in the mood for talking, proceeded to blare dark techno as loud as the stereo system would allow. And with that, it was decreed. There would be no talking for the twenty-minute ride.

We arrived at the airport at 14:20, well on time for the two to check in and pass through security. I walked with Evan a small way off from Dylan and Emily, and tried to talk about the time we'd spent together. I almost managed a genuine smile when we remembered the first time we'd run into Cliffords together, and to consider how quickly it had escalated from there. Then we talked about the DMT night, and how messed up it had been, and how awesome it was that we'd been able to move past it.

And then we were at the check-in counter, just like that, and Evan's big duffel bag vanished on the mechanical belt. We continued talking, promising each other to visit one another within the next year (a promise we kept, thanks to Evan who came to visit me), and made one or two final, not so kosher jokes. We hugged like two brothers in arms as we stood in front of the security line, and Dylan said goodbye to Emily.

I want to say that my heartbeat slowed when I finally turned to say goodbye to her. That, just like that, with one decision, I was able to throw it all behind me. But obviously, my heart almost burst from my chest as I approached my angel of darkness. I met her hug and held her for an uncomfortably long time. I wanted her to say it, or just say something if she couldn't force an apology. Maybe even, "Greg wasn't a good kisser", maybe that would have done it. But nothing came that was worth mentioning.

"Goodbye, Arlo. Hopefully I'll see you again soon." she said, her voice actually hopeful. She was smiling that same friendly smile I'd first gotten to know so long ago as she brushed her hair from her face, and I could have wept, but I didn't.

"Yeah" was all I managed, as I forced a smile and let her go.

The two of them started queuing to pass through security, and Dylan and I stood in silence and watched as they handed over their passports. They looked back, one more time, and waved as they turned the corner to evaporate.

I turned to Dylan, who now had his arm around my shoulders and was squeezing me tightly. "Thanks for being there Dylan. I wouldn't have been able to do it alone." Dylan nodded his head and smiled that all knowing smile that fit him so well. "I'll always be there for you Arlo. Now let's go home." So, we turned around and got an Uber home, leaving behind my best friend and the girl of my dreams.

And sometimes, I think back and consider it, maybe it was just one intricate endless dream. Something to entertain me, something to show me truths and make me a better person. But the

truth is, life is this messy. We'd all like to just pretend that the fucked-up things only happen in our dreams. But that's just more denial. The messiness of love, this thing that's painted with roses and smells like diamonds in Hollywood movies, is not really what you expect. So, sure, maybe the title *is* cheesy, but shouldn't it be? Because you don't always get the girl, and people aren't always what they say they are, and they don't always act like they say they'll do. So, just take everything with a grain of salt, and keep on trying till you find your expectation.

Do I still believe that love works? Yeah, and not because this was a juvenile experience, I get pissed off when people tell me that, but because the whole point of love is that it can work. There are some many examples in the real world that prove it. But even when it works, it's not what you expect, so when you think you've found it, make assurance double sure.

So, look for that person, look for your Emily. The one that drives you insane but reels you back each time, the one that doesn't even have to ask nicely for you to jump from that cliff. Look till you find, the one person out there, that you can truly love, even if she makes it incredibly hard to do so. And *that's* what you should expect.

THE END

## Epilogue

My plane was taking off at 16:00. Even in Cape Town that meant being there an hour or two in advance, after all, no one's *actually* a fan of stressful flying. But I was in no way or shape stressed. Not about the flying at least.

Perhaps I should add some context. Like maybe, it's now the year 2019 and for some reason I'm still writing about this girl that I met more than four years ago. The leech in my brain, the toothache that cannot be removed, yep, she's still there doing her thing which for me is pretty much just existing. If I was to be honest, her doing anything more than existing would probably provoke the final catalyst to have my brain completely melted. So, Emily, though you will never read this, thank you for cutting me off at the right time, and just choosing existence above whatever it is the two of us are capable of.

Halfway through December 2018, I did something I had never imagined possible. I swallowed my pride, and although I felt only anger and terror at the thought of seeing Emily again after our last encounter (to cut that encounter short, I presented her with a book I had written for and about her, she read about 30, maybe 40 pages and decided she hated everything about it, something which I continuously and profusely apologized for even though I'd done nothing wrong apart from forgetting/intentionally not changing the names), and soooo, here we are, me having managed to get over myself and trying to remove this negative energy that had taken hold after our last conversation.

So, I wrote her, told her I would be in Cape Town for the next three weeks, and asked her if she would be interested in grabbing a coffee sometime. She replied, yes, she would love to, and so the events that probably were inevitable began to unfold, though I never could have seen them happening quite as they did. But hey, that's life for you, life throws literal curveballs at you and expects you to just roll with it. And as soon as you realize that that's a totally doable and plausible thing, to just roll with it and let go, one suddenly feels a whole lot better and in a far better position to cope with these strange and wonderful things our hearts manage to muster up.

As it so happened, this whole coffee thing was not meant to happen, and that's not a bad thing. The process that I would go through would not have been possible if we'd left it at a coffee so it's funny that a gentle and innocent encounter such as two people meeting up for a coffee was not the right thing for me.

What the universe apparently intended to steer me towards was something different entirely. And I'm only so bold to place partial blame on the universe because if the universe isn't at least a percentage to blame for how things evolved, then I'm unfortunately left to conclude that I am a self-destructive human being who enjoys emotional torture and turmoil. AKA, the universe better be semi-responsible, otherwise it may be some time for a few cheeky therapy sessions.

I wanted to visit Emily's mother before my departure, given that we had become quite close upon my last visit. Visiting her mother was in fact the only reason I considered messaging Emily at all, given that I had still been under the impression that we were not on good terms. So, I messaged both, Emily was offered a coffee, and the mother was offered a visit around the house. Yeah, that seems a little weird, but it would have been weirder still if I'd messaged the mother without messaging Emily at all. Although, the causal kitchen conversation would have been amusing for sure, not matter how I'd played my cards.

"So, Emily. Arlo's back in Cape Town. Will you be seeing him while he's here?" asks Emily's mother, unassuming.

"What? How do you know he's back in Cape Town?" responds Emily, confused but also unsure whether her mother is joking.

"He wrote me and asked if he could come by the house sometime and say hi. Didn't he say anything?" asks Emily's mother.

"Absolutely not. Now I feel terrible. This is how he must have felt over the last four years. This is what being unloved feels like. Oh God, I must be in love with him after all, how could I not see it till now!" exclaims Emily as she jumps up from her chair and races out the door. She gets in her car and drives to Arlo, hoping desperately that it's not too late, that she still has a chance with this wonderful and amazing human being...

OK fine, so I did get a little carried away, but shit, it would have been a conversation of note regardless. But anyways, yeah, I wrote both of them and made loose plans to come over and visit sometime soon. Fate did not will it so.

I will spend quite a while insisting that fate had something to do with this whole thing, or that it at least wasn't as straight forward as a black and white occurrences. There are some questions I have that will never be answered, but for me personally it makes the whole thing a lot more interesting. Like damn, somebody is pulling my strings, or I've been yanking at them myself for the last four years, just because I thought it was funny.

Fate thought it'd be a good idea, if Emily's mother departed on a vacation on the 27<sup>th</sup> of December. And damn fate, would you look at that, it does seem oddly fitting that Arlo was incapable of making any plans before the 27<sup>th</sup> of December given previous family arrangements. So, he ended up in a spot where Emily's mother would not be at the house and Emily would be at home alone, doing whatever an Emily does in her free time. I was wary, don't get me wrong, I already thought it was *fucky* that fate was throwing shit like this at me without anything resembling an explanation, but hey, I guess that's what I needed. A whole bunch of confusion served up nicely on a silver platter, subtly carrying a stick of dynamite to liberate my brain.

29<sup>th</sup> of December is what I'm getting at here. I meet up with Emily at her house, after no shit waiting outside for 45 minutes because she had taken a nap and forgotten to wake up/set an alarm/be a human being/anything. I finally got into the house after hopping over a brick wall, being almost mauled to death by dogs that genuinely had zero interest in making me their afternoon snack, and so I stood there in front of the girl I thought I hated, and melted as she wrapped her warm and all-encompassing arms around me. With that tight embrace, I think a little part of me dialed the clock backwards oh so quickly, and suddenly I was 16 years old again and star struck to the bone.

I never forgot what I'd felt earlier that same year. That feeling of being absolutely betrayed by somebody I held so dearly to my heart. That feeling of realizing that a large part of your life was actually quite insignificant to the counterparty of that part, and that the other person was actually not ready to accept that I was just a good human being who had fallen for the wrong somebody. I never forgot, but after the first warm embrace, the feeling of familiarity in Emily's home, the feeling of being in the right place at the right time, the feeling of just being very present, was something I hadn't prepared for at all. An argument was hands down the only thing I had prepared for before meeting up with Emily. And that didn't come.

What did come was a whole lot of confusion. And for the first time in my life I can say that the confusion fully stems from me, factually this is a correct statement. I managed to remove the *What if* from the whole equation, but I'm getting ahead of myself and I'll revisit this in a bit.

So, where did my confusion come from? I'm going to list the sources in the most objective way possible, so it might not be fluid to read but it'll be journalistic almost and better off for it!

- **Confusion source 1:** She opened up to me about things she has never done before, things that I will not even scrape at, as to protect the things she told me in confidence.

Again, I don't think she'll ever actually read this, but for me as a human being, for me as someone with morals, I will not spit out what we discussed because it's the decent thing to do.

- **Confusion source 2:** I am invited to her bedroom to watch a movie. The movie is played on her tablet which lies in her bed, and it is expected of me to lie down on this bed beside her. It is not implied that this is romantic in any way shape or form, even sexual for that manner. But it does come across to me as strange for someone who knows very well that I have been in love with them to invite me into their bed. Maybe she realized at that moment that I was decent human being and would never actually try something with her. *Maybe.*
- **Confusion source 3:** I pick up on signals that I interpreted as interest. Playing with her feet to get comfortable, continuously sending her head in the general direction of my body as though it's looking for a place to settle down. Even as I type this, I admit that this shit seems to be normal for her. She is inherently friendly with those around her, but here I am so confused, and it would have been nice to get a clarification or nullification of what the fuck was going on. More on this later.
- **Confusion source 4:** I'm just an actual idiot and need to work on looking too into shit in the future. When a girl tells you that she may have missed the pill or taken it twice, that apparently can be a full on friendly topic of conversation. When a girl lies next to you and undoes her pants beneath the blanket, this can be because she's so comfortable with you that you're pretty much just a bro. I am a bro. I'm the broest bro. On the last day of your stay in Cape Town, if she comes downstairs to you and asks you to cover her in sunscreen even though her step sister is seated beside you, it has nothing to do with who you are, plainly that you may be a better option for applying sunscreen than the step sister. Yeah, these are all things I need to come to accept as potentially normal in a good friendly relationship? Lol, fuck. The next time somebody message me, "come upstairs", I'm not even going to spend a split second looking into that.
- **Note on confusions:** My point is mainly that there were many confusions. I did not pull this intuition out of my ass because I desperately wanted to start up this whole affair again. Because I am the person I am, once it was started there was no going back, but I didn't intentionally start this. It ended up where it did because of a mixture of fate,

Emily's actions and my absolute idiocy. Be very careful out there homies, not all is how it seems.

So, my confusion should certainly be a little more clear now, at least in terms of its origin, but how you may ask did that night end? Dear reader, the light and life of this book, you must be able to guess by now? Obviously I didn't try anything, morally so considering the things we had discussed, but still I consciously chose to do absolutely nothing, whilst also having a mild heart attack (swear to fuck, my heart has never beat so quickly). Maybe that should have been the end of it. But I was not ready to simply up and move from such a thing. My perception had been literally blasted to pieces. Everything I thought I had known, was false and as far away from the truth as possible. *Probably*. So, what followed were four to five days of agony where I had to deal with the fact that I had possibly passed up on an opportunity to finally answer the big *What If* question in my life. Yeah, I suffered. Oh yeah, in fact it was genuine fucking torture. But god am I lucky that it led to me making plans with Emily four hours before my flight back to Glasgow (right, btw, I live in Glasgow now. Story for another time perhaps lol).

So again, to cut this whole agonizing thing short, I feel like you're probably wondering how this thing can still be going on after four years but I'm proud of you that you've managed to grin and bear through it. Like shit. Stories that pan over one or two years are hard enough to keep up with and here I am trying to make it a generational/annual thing.

\*HINT HINT, it'll definitely become an annual thing and you should totally subscribe to [www.chapternextoftheearloandemilystory.com](http://www.chapternextoftheearloandemilystory.com) where I'll be sure to keep everyone posted till Emily kills me or I die of natural causes.\*

I meet up with Emily on the day of my flight, 4<sup>th</sup> of January 2019. It's a sunny day. The wind of the past two days has calmed down immaculately, and the plans of a beach day seemed to be right on par with the will of destiny/fate/some fucker in the sky who likes fucking with me. So, we go to the beach, have a lovely time. She drops me at her house, so she can do grocery shopping and I can take a shower before a 14 hour flight. And then, I wait. She comes home, tells me she'll drive me to the airport (after I ask if I'm honest, but there's no way I was going to pay 200 rand for an uber after potentially wrecking my soul yet again) and so we make our way on our way.

The car pulls up in the drop off spot of Cape Town International Airport. I start extracting my bags from the boot of her car, and she says the words, “It was so nice seeing you,” I hug her and look down at my suitcase. The question burns my chest and tightens my throat, but somehow I’m able to make the words come out. By her reaction I have the feeling she was kind of expecting it, even though I’m sure she’d hoped I wouldn’t ask it.

“So, Emily, I need to ask you this question. The other night while I was here, I thought that something might have been going on, or am I maybe tripping absolute balls?”

The silence is palpable. For real though, like I know I say that a lot and yeah I like the saying, but for real, I could feel the fucking silence for a short minute, at least. Until she shook her head and said, “no, you were tripping. I’m, sorry, I’m just not into anyone at the moment”. And suddenly, 5000 kilos of weight were lifted from my shoulders. I semi-smiled and said very simply, “That’s so fine, I just needed to know for my own head”.

With that, I gathered every inch of luggage I had with me, scurried around the passenger side of the car, and shouted backwards with quite gusto and theatrics, “Live long and prosper well, Emily. Get home safe, and uh, yeah, thank you.” I walked hell bent towards the entrance of the airport. As I felt her eyes stabbing into my back, I smiled, a smile so real and large for all the wrong reasons, it was my first breath of worry free 2019. And I hoped it would pave the way for a genuinely good and wholesome year, one where maybe, finally, after these long and endless four years, I would be able to find someone else, another Emily, to fill the void that certainly exists within me.

So, what have I learnt? I have learnt that there will always be something about Emily, something which I cannot put my finger on but know very well exists deep within me. I have learnt that I cannot switch this off. That life doesn’t work that way. Life will let you know when you are finished with it.

I have learnt that you can have deep and meaningful connections with people, even without there existing a depth or meaning to your interactions at all. My relationship with Emily is so surface based, I am painfully aware of it, but yet some stupid and naïve, maybe adolescent part of me, treasures our interactions so much and garners genuine reward from them. And so, I cannot abandon them completely, but simply hope that the status of our relationship becomes more

balanced before we next meet. I cannot continue as the slave, she should not continue as the master. I hope she thinks about what I asked her, and that she realizes how fucked I have been over this whole situation. I can no longer blame how much she has fucked me up entirely on her. She is toxic for me, and she uses me, but I am also a big boy and should be able to see things like that for myself. So, from here I grow.

## End Notes

Today is Wednesday the 8<sup>th</sup> of August 2018. I started this book on the 28<sup>th</sup> of November 2014. So yeah it's almost been four years now, and I never gave up. Initially, the writing process was quick, and the story pretty much just told itself, my fingers only putting ink to paper.

But then, life happened, I was thrust into the two final years of my education, and though I wished simply dropping out of high school and becoming an author is a safe path to success, it's not, and I do kind of want to go to university.

What I'm trying to say is, that there was a good year and a half, probably even two full years, where I did not write a single word, apart from a singular rare occurrence where I came home way too drunk, gambled away 80 Euros on an online blackjack site, and somehow managed to write a full page of this book. Which page it is, I obviously won't tell, but I can be so arrogant as to assume that you wouldn't be able to tell simply by comparing it to the others.

This is the third draft of a book which I first managed to complete in November 2017. The feeling of finishing a project like this, is hard to describe. Especially under the circumstances that it was started. But the thing that strikes me the most, is that writing a book about someone like Emily, is a weird and wonderful experience. It's angst, I guess much like the teenage years are supposed to be, so I like what it's become. And I'm the author so that's pretty much all that counts.

Considering that, I am going to use this epilogue to address some things in the book, which I feel should be clarified given that I'm afraid they'll be taken too seriously.

There are parts of this story which are true, there are parts of this story which are exaggerated and there are also some parts of this story which were added to emphasize a point. That being said, the characters in my story are based on real people, and anything I say about these characters is to be taken with a pinch of salt, given that it is written from my experience. It would be impossible for me to be objective and impartial with my retelling of the events that unfolded in 2014. But then again, it would probably also be pretty boring if I had written a historical record of chronological events which are all pretty much me just getting intoxicated and not hooking up with a girl.

There is, however, a reason why I constantly insist that the story is completely true and should be read as such. I'm going to call it the Fargo effect. The Coen brothers directed a Film named Fargo and a TV series of the same name, which is where I got my inspiration and the name

for the technique. It is ridiculously simple for the effect that it can have. At the beginning of both the Film and the series, the director maintains that the story depicted, is based on a true story. The story unfolds, and the audience is left wondering what part of this wild tale could possibly be true. And the answer is simple, none of it is true. But that's the power of the technique. By telling your audience that it's true, that they're reading/watching a part of reality, changes the way the product is received. And that's what I wanted to do. I wanted my audience to constantly wonder what parts on earth of this story could be real. Based on the reactions of the first draft of this book, the technique works, just ask my mom. Just because I've changed the names and made up some places, shouldn't kill the effect, if anything, it should make its impact a little more devious. But unlike the Coen brothers, truth exists in these pages.

Secondly and lastly, I want to clarify that Emily did exist. She doesn't anymore. That is to say that her character is based on somebody I once knew. Somebody who I saw as my Emily, as my everything in fact. But these feelings too, can change. And they have. And I've had to come to realize that Emily isn't the person I've made her out to be, and that forcing her into this holy and perfect light, was neither good for her or me. I'd love to say that me and Emily are still friends, and that she loves that I wrote a book about her. But that's not true, or at least I don't know about our friendship, but I sure as shit know that she hates everything about this book, the idea, the fact that it exists and the part of me that wrote it.

But fuck that. I'm proud of this book, I finished it, and it helped me become a better person.

So, thank you dear reader, for taking your time to read through this story, for sharing your heart with mine and taking a peek at my soul. For just like the letter I wrote for Emily, this book is now too, a bare piece of Arlo.

## Some Pictures



Scarlett and Arlo in Chapter 5

Evan, Violet and Arlo at Silvermine in chapter 7



Arlo at Silvermine in Chapter 7

Arlo in Layla's shower in Chapter 9



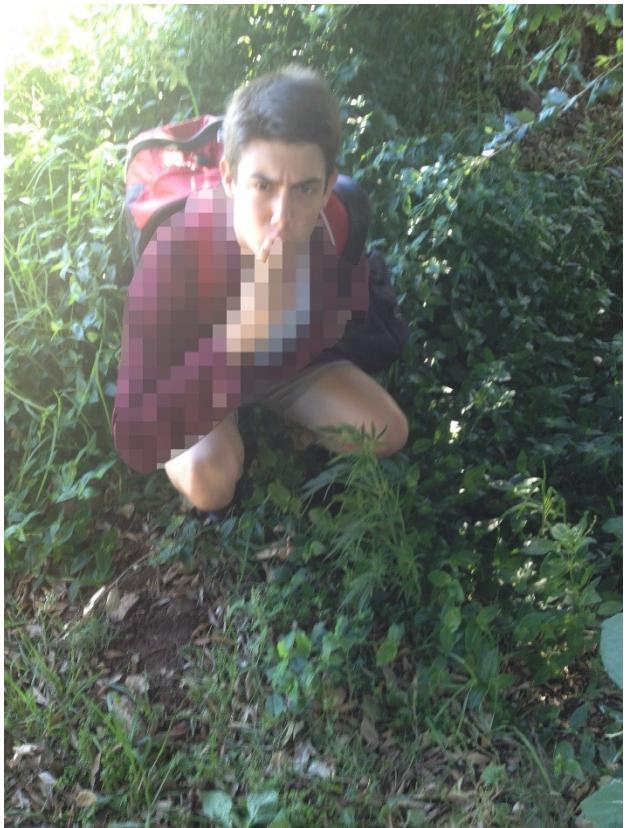
*Arlo super schwifty in Chapter 11*



*Arlo, Ryan and Evan in physics class*



*Arlo learning to drive in Chapter 22*



*Arlo finds a weed plant on school grounds – last days of school*



*A panorama picture taken at Bontebok National Park in Chapter 22*

**Love, it's not really how you'd expect it to be.**

High School is, *essentially* a place of learning. Although, if I'm to be perfectly honest with myself and everyone else in the world, most of what we're taught there, let's face it, no one is ever going to ask us for any of it. It's kind of just the place your parents send you after you've been drawing pictures for six years in primary school. They don't know what to do with you so they improvise and teach you algebraic functions and imaginary numbers and whatever *other* nonsense it is they come up with on the spot. All that kind of stuff.

As it so happened to be, the girl I'll be mentioning at quite an excessive amount throughout this story (The story is about her after all), went to the same High school as me for three whole months while I was on a school exchange in sunny Cape Town, South Africa. I know what you're probably thinking, three months this guy is insane, he wasn't in love with her, he doesn't even know what love is. Well then, with no offense whatsoever intended, let me already disprove you without even the slightest spec of reason. I don't need to show you evidence just yet. How about you read the story and if you still have your doubts about my mindset, then I'll listen to your arguments. I'm an open minded guy after all, everyone should be entitled to their wrong opinion. |

*The beginning of the book on the 28<sup>th</sup> of November 2018*

*This may also serve as proof of originality in case people don't believe that I'm capable of writing a book...*