

First Impressions

Lukas sat in the backseat listening to his parents argue.

“Jimmy,” said his mother, “you should have pulled into the parking lot up ahead.”

“What?”

“The parking lot right there. You should’ve waited and gone into that one.”

His father sighed, glanced at the rearview mirror and theatrically flicked on his blinker.

“Honey, I went to school here too and...”

“You don’t have to be so dramatic,” said his mother. “I’m only trying to save us some walking.”

His father sighed again.

His mother crossed her arms. “Fine. Fine. I. Don’t. Care. Park wherever you want.” She huffed dramatically, and looked out the window.

Lukas popped his headphones back in. Music blared. Taylor Swift. All he could hear was the gentle hum of the car as it got out of the turn lane and went to the other parking lot.

He hated when his parents got stressed out. It always led to silly fighting and boycotts. Once his dad made the mistake of asking if there was anything else to eat than cereal for dinner when his mom had a deadline due. The house didn’t have cereal for weeks. Lukas’s favorite after school snack was cereal.

He loved Rice Krispies, because of the small faint popping sound that they made when he poured in his milk. He loved that faint sound; it reminded him of a camera.

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Lukas had always loved photography. He loved being able to capture a split second emotion and turn it into a lifetime. He loved getting to know someone through the lens, seeing their personality in still frames.

In high school, he worked on the yearbook staff as the photographer. He was the only guy in the class.

“You know people think you’re gay right?” John asked him one day. John had been Lukas’ friend since seventh grade when they both would’ve rather watch cartoons than naked videos. John played football now. Lukas didn’t, and Lukas didn’t care. Yearbook was an excuse to take pictures of other people.

John stopped criticizing Lukas when he got the dominant photograph on the varsity football spread.

Always with a camera in hand, Lukas went to sporting events, school assemblies, club meetings. He felt power, warmth behind the lens of the camera. When he pointed it at people, they gave him gapping smiles. He fell in love with the smiles, separating the people from the photographs, blurring out the rumors that circulated the school hallways. He fell in love with the idea of the smiling faces, of the people that they could be.

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After awkward interactions with too many smiling greeters and an hour of waiting in the elevator line, the cramped dorm room was filled. Cheap plastic bags stuffed with clothes, bins of toiletries, and a cardboard box full of comic books littered the floor, desks, and shelves.

“Do you want us to help you unpack? We could help you make your bed, or help you get rid of your roommate’s bed?”

“I think I’m good mom.”

“I still can’t believe that your roommate didn’t contact you to let you know that he had changed his mind.” She started unfolding his covers and shaking them out.

“Mom.” Lukas glanced over at his dad, looking for some support, but he was busy fiddling around with the fridge.

“He could’ve at least warned you that he wasn’t bringing the futon.” She climbed up the steps of his lofted bed and started tucking the covers under the mattress.

“Mom, I can do that. You guys can leave.”

“I guess you can unloft his bed and use it as a couch, but,” she said climbing down, “I’ll have to send you some pillows to make it nice and comfy.” She moved to the other side.

“Mom, stop.” Lukas grabbed his mom’s shoulders and held her on the ground. “I can unpack myself. You guys should go. Beat the traffic.” He looked over his shoulder at his dad who was now leaning against the doorframe.

Suddenly he was wrapped up in his mom’s arms. He stood there for a second, letting his mom hug him. Even though she never really let him see it, he knew how hard his leaving was on her. She always joked about him staying home for a year, “building up his GPA”, but she made the joke one-too-many times. She left community college pamphlets on the kitchen table, talked about the money he’d save, but she never seriously asked him to stay. She knew a big school would be good for him, especially one with a fantastic engineering program.

A minute passed.

“Okay mom,” Lukas said, his arms pinned tightly to his side. “Mom,” he said again, squirming slightly under her embrace.

“Oh, don’t act like you aren’t enjoying this,” his mother joked before releasing him from the hug, but not from her grasp. Her hands remained on his shoulders. “Just remember your father and I are just a phone call away.” Another quick hug.

“Mom.”

“Okay, okay, I’m done.” She popped out of the hug and clapped her hands. “I’m going to miss you so much, sweetie.” She patted his shirt free of wrinkles.

“See you at the first home game,” Lukas’ father pushed himself up off of the doorframe. “And hey,” he said, turning “don’t be stupid.” He smacked Lukas on the back. He was never big on physical affection.

Lukas walked to the door with his parents. They walked to the end of the hallway. He expected them to hesitate when they reached the end, to look back one last time and wave. He expected to see flood-works from his mom. He expected...more.

His parents turned the corner and didn’t look back.

Lukas swung his door shut and unpacked, but first he finished making his bed. That was what he was expected to do.

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Lukas had always loved photography, but he made the mistake at being good at math. Thriving in a subject that most kids loathed, his parents enrolled him in after school tutoring to help him “expose his potential”.

“This tutoring will let you be able to get another year ahead. It’ll be really great for you.” His mother said, dropping him off at tutoring for the first time. “Plus you love math. This should be fun.” Rolling his eyes, Lukas opened the car door, grabbed his backpack, and hopped out. Math was so much fun. Always.

Lukas had hid his camera in his backpack.

After tutoring was over at six, he texted his mom that it was running an hour late. It wasn't. He walked around and snapped photos at the park, photos of squirrels, spider webs, leaves, clouds, flowers, ponds, ducks.

Lukas never told his parents that he liked photography. He never saw a reason. Math. That was what he was good at. That was what he loved.

He always told his mom to pick him up at seven.

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"Floor meeting in the student commons: seven o'clock sharp," read the white board fastened to the residential aid's door. Lukas had just finished unpacking his last set of comics. Now, instead of being cramped in a box, they could breathe on his shelf. He looked at his watch: 6:45. He sighed. The last thing he wanted to do tonight was listen to a boring mantra about cleanliness and roommate agreements and alcohol and other boring dorm room guidelines. First, he was pretty clean. His mom always emphasized his chores saying "he would never get a girl by making her clean up her own spaghetti plate." Second, he didn't have a roommate and probably wouldn't get one until second semester if at all. And third, he already had alcohol, which he found in his fridge, a small 6-pack with a note from his dad: "Have fun, but be smart".

Really, there was no reason for him to attend this floor meeting, none at all. But of course he'd go, of course he'd grab an extra chair after a girl sat in his, and of course he'd participate in the icebreaker game because that's what he was expected to do.

"So the icebreaker on this sheet that I was given says to go around and say your name and your major, but I just think that's boring. So instead, I've come up with one on my own," announced the floor R.A. She wore a neon green t-shirt with the words "WELCOME TO YOUR

NEW HOME” printed on the front, and a name sticker that read “REBECCA”. A short blonde bob framed her circular face, which was covered in glitters. She looked like a Barbie, a big, giant, real-life version of Ken’s dream and my nightmare.

“I think it’d be fun to get to know you guys a little bit better. What I’m gonna have you guys do is go around the circle and say something about yourself, something that defines you as a person. I’ll go first. My name is Rebecca and I like to people watch because I find everything about first impressions so exciting. In fact I’m so excited to get to hear about you guys and form my own first impressions.” R.A. Rebecca talked as if she was reading from a teleprompter.

Clearly this was a spur of the moment deviation from the boring schedule.

“Okay, so now let’s start working our way around the circle. How about we start with you...” she stretched out the last syllable inviting the girl sitting next to her to speak.

“Margo.”

“Hi, Margo. How about you tell us something about yourself, something that defines you as a person,” Rebecca said. Stretching her bright pink lipstick, she smiled widely and leaned in close to Margo’s face.

Margo’s face was something that made you want to lean in. Giant, owl-like brown eyes paired with thick eyebrows that balanced them out. Light freckles that scattered the brim of her nose and the tops of her cheeks. She had a look, a look that made you want to look. Unlike the other girls who wore a variation of high-waisted crop tops and sundresses (perfect for moving heavy boxes up two flights of stairs), Margo wore giant, maroon flannel boxers, a pair of short cotton socks, and an “I love NY” t-shirt with a kidney bean shaped yellow stain just below the neckline. Her dark brown hair was up in a messy bun with fly-aways going in every direction. She had a look, a look that made you want to look.

“Something that defines me as a person...” Margo repeated, closing her eyes, thinking and breathing deeply. Her chest moved up and down.

Lukas pictured facts popping up behind her eyes and bursting like overfilled balloons. She was the type of girl whose thoughts appeared in balloons, fun and filled but fragile.

“I don’t trust people that only sneeze once,” she stated, shrugging her shoulders slightly as if this was a common trait that normal, ordinary people should all share.

“What?” Lukas couldn’t help saying out loud. Everyone’s heads swiveled from him and then back to Margo, who now stared at Lukas. He didn’t understand. She had stated it so simply, so purely as if to say *I’m lactose intolerant*: with regret and certainty.

“Well,” she said. “I usually sneeze twice, most people do actually, three times sometimes, but very rarely do I sneeze once.” Lukas tilted his head, still miserably confused by her thought process. She sighed.

“When I sneeze twice, I feel finished, complete, but when I only sneeze once, I wait for the next sneeze, and when it doesn’t come, I feel,” she shook her head slowly, pausing to think, struggling on the last word “...disappointed.”

All of the eyes in the room stared at Margo. Everyone looked shocked. A couple of people even looked creeped out, curling themselves up in their chairs as if trying to fade back into their high school years but not Lukas. Lukas sat still, staring at Margo, taking in as much as he could. He wished he had his camera, wished he could move freely throughout the room and snap photos of her and the others, wished he could capture her emotions on film.

Finally she opened her eyes and blinked, focusing in on Lukas.

“People that only sneeze once are always expecting something, and I hate people who are constantly disappointed.”

“Wow, okay, uh, that’s, uh, that’s very interesting,” Rebecca said after uncomfortably shifting in her chair and ruffling her papers.

“You said define yourself, but I wouldn’t say that I’m interesting,” Margo said, still looking in Lukas’ direction. “Weird with a touch of eccentric is how I like to see myself.” She flashed a smile either indifferent or blind to Rebecca’s awkward tone and winked at Lukas, or at least that’s what he thought. It could’ve been a twitch or a glint of light. Maybe there was something in her eye.

Lukas liked to think of it as a wink.

Eventually the icebreaker game made it around to him. Lukas had searched his jumbled brain for anything to impress Margo, but the only thing he could think of was “I never disappoint” which one, was totally lame, and two would probably prove itself wrong by disappointing her. So instead, he went the “fun-fact” route: “My name is Lukas and I can identify all of the constellations on any given night,” he stated, keeping Margo’s face in his peripheral vision, but never quite looking her way. “I don’t know why, but I’ve always liked the night sky.” She didn’t react, no spark in her eyes, no raise in the corners of her mouth, nothing.

“That’s awesome, Lukas,” said Rebecca. “Our university has an awesome Planetarium on campus that you should definitely check out if you have time.”

The game continued on to a boy next to Lukas named Bryan who loved to play and coach baseball. The game continued on, but her owl-eyes did not. Margo studied him, head to toe, as if she were calculating something.

Lukas hated math.