

Ivy

Dried mucus clogged his nose in another attempt to suffocate him. In times like these, Arlo would switch to breathing through his mouth, but the conscious effort would keep him from actually falling asleep. *This is barely better than not breathing at all*, he thought. He stretched out on his ten year old twin mattress, resting as quietly he could, except for the huffing and puffing that was beginning to fog up his glasses. The bedroom was unbearably hot. Sweat began to pool on his arms and back, fanning out in faint streams. The room was dim and he was afraid of the dark. Poltergeists could easily find refuge in the shadows of the navy drywall or in the cracks on the ceiling. He yanked his flannel comforter over his head, doing his best to stifle his fear and growing anxiety.

Suddenly, the bedroom door slammed open and Arlo's blood spiked from his heart to his fingertips.

"HAHA!!" Cesar laughed, "What are you doing in the dark if you're still such a scaredy-cat?"

Arlo could hear his pulse through the inside of his head as he attempted to collect himself. He wouldn't be so embarrassed if *he* was the younger brother, and not the other way around. Maybe then, he wouldn't have felt the need to reassert his dominance.

"You really think this is funny?" he asked sourly, scowling just enough to contain his immaturity and untamed animosity. Cesar could sense that they would both spill over.

"I'm sorry...I just thought...I'm just messing around dude. I didn't mean to make you upset, I know your nose has been bad and the AC..."

"Stop it, just stop it." The flushing in his face only made him feel more unstable. He stepped over the matted laundry piled on the rug, shoved his brother against his lopsided bedpost, and yanked his favorite stuffed dog from beneath the covers. "Cesar, look at me. Look what you've made me do." He proceeded to tear the retriever in half from the hind legs, spilling its cotton entrails over the edge of the hardwood floor.

Not a moment passed before Cesar's hesitation turned to fury. Arlo's hips buckled as his younger brother drove through him, launching the pair into the wall and back onto the space between the beds. A surge of adrenaline softened the feeling of his brother's fists as they began to beat erratically on his chest.

"PLEASE!" Arlo shouted, his aggression quickly turning to desperation. "GET OFF ME NOW!" But Cesar refused to stop, his watering eyes staring right into Arlo's, as if the space just above his nose was a crosshair. *He might actually kill me*, he thought. His instincts reached the threshold reserved for survival, and he began to violently kick in every direction he could, until their father charged into the room and tore the two apart.

"WHAT ARE YOU TWO DOING??" he shouted, pushing up his boxy glasses that had fallen loose on his face. Arlo was busy panting, but he wouldn't have known what to say even if he had the breath to do so. He raised his head and glanced slowly at Cesar, who was curled over on the side of his bed, crying. Their father, sensing the intensity of the situation, sent them off to separate rooms to sleep for the night, or at least until they could make-up themselves.

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Just another unevenful day, he thought. The sun was beginning to set, and the symphony of frogs beyond the trees was Cesar's only company. He had spent the day biking around the

neighborhood, weaving between potholes in the asphalt and looking for any of the few friends he had from school. *I hope Arlo is in a good mood for once.* He stepped off his shabby two-wheeler, walking beside it as he approached the garage that sat at the top of the driveway. He pushed his thin hair out his eyes and looked back towards the faded street before going inside. *Maybe I can get him to come with me tomorrow.* The house was quiet because everyone had already eaten. The silver TV box was on, running re-runs out of their home studio while his parents snored on the couch.

Cesar knew that Arlo was sitting in the dark because he couldn't see the bedroom light coming from beneath the door. *Maybe he'll come with me if I lighten the mood.* He kicked the door open, barging in and letting out a laugh that was only half-genuine.

"You really think this is funny?" Arlo asked. His jaws clenched and pulled the skin tight around his face. His body was beginning to shake as he got out of his bed. *Great, now I've done it. I hate that he's always like this. If I just apologize, maybe he won't push me around or anything.* But Arlo wasn't feeling so considerate.

"Stop it, just stop it", he said, grabbing his brother's favorite stuffed dog, *Dakota*. "Cesar, look at me. Look what you've made me do." He didn't even hesitate when he disemboweled it. But the room did stop for an instant, right when its tail waved for the last time and plopped down on the edge of the blue area rug.

The rest of his thoughts after this point were largely unintelligible. He felt his stomach lurch into his throat, propelling him towards his brother at full force. His blood rushed from deep inside his chest to the vessels around his eyes and along the fists he used to smash his brother's chest. He was animalistic, but he was honest.

"PLEASE! GET OFF ME NOW!" Cesar heard his brother shout, but his cries went in one ear and out the other. Arlo began to flail like a fish out of water, like an elk just moments before being devoured. Suddenly, a large hand grabbed him by the scruff of his neck and tossed him against the side of his flimsy bed frame. He didn't have to look to feel his father's light grey eyes staring at him with fervent shock, but with subtle sympathy.

All of his body heat had escaped during the brawl, out from his skin to the already oven of a room. He felt empty, and like his brain was melting out from his eyes. Even when his father moved him out to the couch in the living room, he was still cold.

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I'm not a good person, am I? Arlo thought. He had gotten to keep the room, but he wasn't really sure that he deserved it. It was close to midnight. The air had finally cooled down, but he still couldn't breathe through his nose. He was on his back again, asking himself why the ceiling looked so far away, and why he finally believed that nothing else was there with him. His head rolled slightly, and he let gravity push his eyes towards the shallow dent near the door, the one he could still feel in his back. The streetlight shone through the window and casted ivy from the dogwood trees onto the wall. He watched the shadow sways for hours, but he eventually closed his sluggish eyes and cried.