

Zachary Tan

The Coward

I smiled and waved as I saw her on my way to class. I couldn't help but take a quick glance at her arms, but she was wearing a sweater like she always did. Even further down, a small darkish dot glared at me from the center of the back of her hand. My breathing shortened. I could suddenly feel my heart beating in my chest. I needed to do something. So, I lightly bit the inside of my cheek. Hard to do when you're smiling.

"Hey," she said, waving back at me.

"Hey." I kept smiling.

"How've you been? I haven't heard from you all summer," she said.

"Not bad, but not too happy about being back. You?"

"Same, but we can't do anything about that?" She paused. "Are you busy now?"

"Kind of, I'm running a bit late to a class. If you want I can send you my schedule later. We should definitely find some time to catch up."

"Sure, sure. Let me know when you're free. I want to know what you've been up to all summer." She laughed. "What a way to start the semester."

I shook my head. "I know right? Anyway, gotta run. See you around." I sped off before she could reply.

I walked a couple of paces before taking a look over my shoulder, but she had already turned around and was walking away. I took a silent deep breath, slowly filling my lungs with air. It made me feel like I was drowning. I tasted something salty in my mouth. She was right. What a way to start the semester.

I made it to the lecture hall and winced as the creaky door announced my tardiness to the world. Instantly over a hundred pairs of eyes were on me. I quietly muttered an apology to the doors and slipped into the seat closest to me. If I hadn't stopped to talk to her, I would've made it on time.

We ran into each other again in my second class of the day. She spotted me as I walked into the lecture hall with a pleasant surprise on her face. I tried not to wince, so I smiled.

"I didn't know you were taking this course as well," she said as I took a seat next to her.

"It sounded interesting, and it counts toward my major, so I thought why not."

"Nice! I heard there was a big project at the end of the semester. I guess I have a partner for it now."

I was about to respond when the professor stood up and spoke.

"Hello everyone. Shall we get started?" He was slightly shorter than the average man, or maybe he just seemed that way because he was wider than average. I couldn't tell, since we were sitting towards the back of the room. "My name is Christopher Fenway, and I'll be teaching CS 150 this semester. Feel free to call me Professor Fenway or Fen."

Suddenly, there was a shadow over me.

"Pearl! Hi!" He had green eyes and brown hair. Pearl turned to him and smiled.

"Oh! You're also in this class?" She said.

"Yeah," he said, then looked at me. "Mind if I squeeze past?"

I shook my head and watched him sit in the empty seat on the other side of Pearl.

"Who's this? Do you know each other?" I asked.

“We just met last class,” Pearl said. “The professor made us do icebreakers and he was my partner. Did you know that he’s also from the city? He went to the public school not too far from us.”

“Are you the friend Pearl was talking about?” He asked. “The one who went to the same middle and high school?”

“Yup, that’s me.” I smiled. “I don’t think we’ve met before. What’s your name?”

“Brandon. Nice to meet you,” he said.

The lecture passed in a flash since I was more focused on Pearl and Brandon’s conversation than the professor. I tried to take notes while they talked about life in the city and high school, but I was too distracted so I just ended up copying the professor’s slides in my notebook. Apparently, just like Pearl, Brandon was also part of the school choir. He had moved around a lot when he was younger but eventually settled in the city when his dad finally found a permanent job. He said he didn’t remember his mother, but it was fine because he had a loving father. He said he was a part of his high school swim team and competed in a few state events. He said he liked reading, but found it hard to make time for it. He said his favorite color was white.

The weeks blended together to form a time that felt both long and short. Our professor announced the final project on the day of the first snowfall. He said teaming and project proposals were due by the end of the week, but we had to get both approved by him first. Naturally, Brandon, Pearl, and I formed a group, since by then Pearl considered him to be a close friend. They shared more classes with each other than I did with either, but we usually met up in the library after classes.

“So we have our team. We could have one more person, but I don’t know anyone else taking this course. What should our project be?” Brandon said in the library the day the project had been announced.

“No idea, but I’m fine with anything,” Pearl said.

“Same here. Don’t have any ideas at the moment.” I shrugged. “Do you have any?”

“I might have one, but I need to think about it more,” Brandon said, staring off into space. His eyes wandered the library, deep in thought, until they landed on Pearl’s hands. “I’ve been meaning to ask, but what’s that dot on the back of your hand? Is it a scar?”

I gagged on the dry air in the library, but it was quiet so no one was disturbed. All my exhales came in twos as if my lungs were trying to suffocate me. My mouth was suddenly parched. I bit the inside of my cheek.

“Yeah...” She stared at her hand. “I got it in high school.”

“Mind if I ask how?” He said.

“No, we were playing around with a pen when I was younger. I got this when I accidentally stabbed myself with that pen. You know that game where you have your hand outstretched and you’re jabbing the pen between your fingers?”

“Yeah, I’ve played it before too. You must have been playing really seriously for it to scar though.” He stared at the scar some more. “Isn’t that a little too far off from between your fingers?”

“What can I say? I can be pretty clumsy sometimes.” She laughed.

“That must’ve hurt, sorry about that.”

“There’s nothing for you to apologize about. If anything I should be the one apologizing to myself.”

I could see Pearl's hand bleeding. I could hear the laughs of the children around me. I watched as he slowly lifted the ballpoint pen and slammed it into the table next to her. I saw her flinch, her hand involuntarily twitching like a dying rat. There were bruises and scrapes along her forearm, and the group surrounding her laughed. She laughed too. Why was she laughing?

I smiled as a teacher looked at us from across the room. He turned around when he heard us laughing and told us to be quiet. She had covered her wound with her other hand. Why? Why didn't she say anything? Why did she hide it? Why did she keep coming back? Why didn't anyone say anything? We were on break so the teacher didn't care and went back on his phone.

"Do you have a band-aid?" She asked me.

"I think I've got one in my bag," I said. "Hold on."

"Aiden, what the hell. What if it scars?" I heard someone say while I was rifling through my back pack.

"Don't worry. It's only fun and games." Aiden didn't look up as he was wiping the blood off his pen with a tissue. "Just think of it like a bigger bruise. It'll go away sooner or later."

I heard a murmur of agreement as I finally found a band-aid and handed it to Pearl. She muttered a thanks and put the band-aid on.

"Remember to put on your sweater after this so no one sees that," Aiden said, pointing at her arm. "I just asked you to take it off to show Helen your bruises. She said she'd never seen them before, so I wanted to show her." Aiden pulled Pearl's arm making her stumble a little. "See this one? I think this is the one from a couple days ago during history class. Remember? I think I got like five different people that day."

"Cool. But didn't you also get hit that day?" Helen asked.

“Yeah, by this bitch.” He pointed at me and I laughed. “Didn’t bruise though. Pearl bruises really easily for some reason. Maybe it’s because she’s so white. Anyway, you asked me how to do it earlier right?”

“Yeah, ” Helen said.

“Look here. First, make a fist.” He balled his right hand into a fist. “Make sure your thumb is next to your pointer finger, not below it.” He moved her thumb. “Like that. Then you want to protrude your middle knuckle on your middle finger just a bit. Yeah, you got it. Then you usually want to aim for the thigh or the upper arm above the elbow. It hurts the most there, especially if you aim for the bone. You also don’t want to tense your wrist. Angle it a little. You’re not punching someone, and usually you’re right next to them, so using your whole arm would give it away.”

Aiden was still holding Pearl’s arm, so he threw a quick jab at it. She took it on her upper left arm near her shoulder. Then broke out of Aiden’s grip and gently held the spot where she had just been hit.

“Nice one. That’ll bruise for sure!” Mateo spoke up.

We all laughed. Pearl smiled.

“Make sure you wear your sweater,” Aiden said.

Pearl nodded, still smiling.

The echoes of laughs faded around me, and I was back in the library again. Pearl’s hand wasn’t bleeding. I wasn’t smiling. Aiden wasn’t sitting next to me with a smug look plastered on his face. Pearl and Brandon were talking about the group project, and I still had my voice stuck in my throat. Would it be enough to apologize? I guess not since we already moved on, but I really should.

My muscles were still tensed, and my heart was still racing. I could hear a faint high-pitched ringing in my ears. I had already been biting the inside of my cheek, so I dug my nails into the fleshy parts of my thumb. I alternated between my middle finger and pointer finger. Middle finger. Pointer finger. Middle finger. Pointer finger.

I hated my body for acting this way. There was no reason for this. Nothing ever happened to me, so why was I feeling like shit. Maybe my body was just doing it for attention. Maybe it wanted me to see a therapist or something. Maybe I should see a therapist. But I know there is nothing wrong with me. I know it. If anything were wrong with me, I probably didn't deserve to be treated anyway. Dealing with this was my punishment. If anything I deserved worse. I still hadn't apologized.

"What do you think about that idea." Brandon's words brought me back to reality.

It took me a second to realize Brandon was talking to me.

"Sorry, what? I was spacing out." I blinked a couple of times and sat upright.

Brandon sighed.

"We should go over it again," Pearl said. "We need to get all the details ironed out first before we can present our idea to the professor."

"All right. I'll share a document with both of you and we can work on the proposal together," Brandon said.

"Sounds good." I nodded.

"Same here," Pearl said.

We agreed to call it a night, and reconvene the next day. I said I still had some work to do and stayed behind. I needed some time to think, alone with my thoughts.

Pearl lied. Because of me? Probably not. Nonetheless, the fact remains that Pearl lied. She also knew I would know she lied. Was she angry at me for not clarifying? Disappointed? Maybe she knew that I wouldn't speak up. She knew I was a coward and wouldn't speak about those again. Or maybe she thinks I forgot. Maybe she thought I thought those acts were so trivial, it was just daily routine. Would you remember what you ate for breakfast years ago? I think I hated that thought more. I hate that I ignore my problems. I hate that I know what my problems are. I hate that I seek the easy way out of everything. I hate that I'm a coward.

I don't deserve to be alive. That thought crosses my mind more often than not, but when it does, my father's voice echoes in my mind.

"That's the coward's way out," he said.

"Just because you can't find a solution, you're just going to give up?" He said.

"You're making a mountain out of a molehill. Everyone has tough days, most of which are worse than yours, so suck it up and move on," he said.

"You're just running away," he said.

I hate that he was right. I am a coward who is trying to run away, but I am too cowardly to even run away. I thought about asking for therapy, but I'm sure that I was just doing it for attention. I didn't need any more attention on me.

The weeks flew by, and before I knew it we were approaching the end of the semester with the presentation deadline and finals fast approaching. I didn't know where all that time went. Each day felt like a drag, but all together, they went by too fast. Through the classes, work, and exams, we still found time at the end of the day to meet up. Some people would come and go, but the core group remained the same: Pearl, Brandon, and I.

By some miracle, Pearl and Brandon somehow got me to start studying for final exams over a week before exam week. I hadn't been doing well in my classes, and I think they had picked up on that. Maybe it had been showing on my face? I think I needed to smile more.

"I think if I ace this exam, I might be able to squeeze a B minus." I did some rough calculations in my head.

"Aww, I'm sure you'll do great," Pearl said. "Plus there will probably be a curve."

"Not with you and Brandon in the class." They had both seemed to keep up their streak of straight A's since the last years of high school and continued it into college. While I also started in the same place, I guess I wasn't diligent enough to keep up in college.

"Oh come on, you're smart. We got this in the bag," Brandon said. Coming from him, it sounded more like an insult than the compliment I knew it was. He would never say something like that with ill intent, so it was completely my fault for thinking like that. Why did I even mention my grade to begin with. I couldn't tell if I was fishing for compliments, or just trying to make a joke.

Who was I kidding? Of course I knew what I was doing. It seemed that my self-esteem had finally hit rock bottom, and was starting to dig. Was this what we did to Pearl as well? We called out and laughed at every little mistake that she made, so she eventually stopped speaking altogether?

I remember the first day she went non-verbal, no one noticed anything. Even by the second week, no one said anything. She would only respond in 'maybe's and 'I think's, with no response longer than two sentences. Her deadpan eyes would dart around every time before she would speak. Was I so haughty and self-absorbed that I would keep calling her out on her faults? Was I just completely oblivious to anyone and everyone around me?

I felt sick. I needed to throw up, but there was nothing in my stomach to throw up. I hadn't been eating well for the past few months. I started biting the inside of my cheek, stopping to eat the occasional chip from the family-size bag in the center of the table.

"We're almost done with the presentation, right?" Pearl asked.

"I think so." I nodded. "I just need to transfer some of our data, and we're all set."

I really didn't carry my weight in that project. It was a mix of Brandon and Pearl wanting to do things early, and my urge to procrastinate. All I really did were read some papers and talk to Brandon and Pearl. I didn't feel like I could rightfully say I participated in any part of the project. I honestly had no idea what in the hell they were talking about half the time. They created their own inside jokes, which maybe I would have gotten if I kept up with the material, or actually went over it.

The air conditioning had broken, so we all had taken our jackets and sweaters off. When I say broken I mean permanently on. It was burning inside. However, I would rather be overly hot than overly cold, so we endured.

It had been a while since Pearl had last taken off her sweater, so I was surprised to see her take it off this time. She had worn sweaters in hotter weather.

"The sweater's coming off?" Brandon said.

"Yup, I think I focus better without it," Pearl said.

The light reflected off of her forearms in just the right way to make the skin there look slightly different, and I remembered. It was while we were changing for PE when she told us about them. She usually skipped PE because of something, but that day she couldn't.

"What's that huge scab on your arm from?" Helen asked. "I don't remember slashing you, was it someone else?"

Pearl looked at her arms, then back to Helen.

“Oh, um, I just scratched myself,” Pearl said.

At the time, I couldn’t tell if she had meant that she physically harmed herself, or if she genuinely just scratched her arm on something. Now I know that while she always wore long sleeves or sweaters outside, she actually preferred short sleeves when inside.

“It’s probably a good thing that you wear your sweater all the time. That scab’s pretty ugly. I know I’d never just walk around with that thing showing.” Helen made a face. “It makes it look like you’re suicidal or something, but we all know you’re not so stop trying to fake it.”

Everyone around us nodded in agreement. Including me.

“Here wear one of my long-sleeved shirts, you wouldn’t want to be put in a psych ward or something just for a few scratches right?” Helen handed Pearl a crumpled grey shirt.

“Thanks,” Pearl said.

It was only months later, after I had accidentally scratched myself with my fingernail that I made the connection. Later that night, I tried replicating it, but something was stopping me. Probably my cowardice and fear of getting hurt. However, even without the test, I was already certain I knew how she got those marks. Why did she ever see us as friends? Did she even see us as friends? Probably not. I need to apologize to Pearl, but I was too scared. I really, really didn’t want to talk about those kinds of things with her. I was too cowardly to risk our friendship.

I’m actually the worst type of human being. I’m the type that follows what other people say with little questions asked. I’m the type of person who doesn’t think deeply about their actions. I’m the type of person who spends way too much time wallowing in self-pity than actually doing something about it. I’m the type of person who would watch their friend be

sexually assaulted and be completely unphased. And cheer on the perpetrator. And think everything is fine because two people said it was fine.

I felt something soft in my mouth, so I held a napkin up to spit it out.

“Oh.” I pulled away the napkin, and it was covered in blood.

“What happened? Are you ok?” Brandon and Pearl turned to me and asked nearly completely in sync.

“I think I bit off part of my cheek.” I felt a sharp pain in my mouth and used my tongue to prod around. I winced as I hit a sore point, and my mouth started to fill with liquid. I felt something soft but not too movable in the blood-soaked napkin. “Yeah... See look.” I began to unfurl the napkin, but Brandon stopped me.

“Don’t show it to me, I might actually throw up,” he said. “Pearl, can you take her to the bathroom to rinse her mouth? I’ll see if I can get an ice pack or gauze or something.”

Brandon ran off.

“Come on.” Pearl grabbed my arm and dragged me to the bathroom.

I was made to bite down on a wad of paper towels until Brandon could find something better to use. While we waited, I opened the napkin. A little chunk of me was in the palm of my hand. Pearl looked over and her eyes widened.

“I think you’re going to need stitches,” she said.

She was right. I did need stitches. They didn’t hurt as much as I imagined, maybe because I was numbed. Opening my mouth wide enough for them to work was the worst part. In the end, they had to force my mouth open, leaving me on the brink of tears. I refused to cry. They were done in less than two hours, including wait time, and I was sent away with a bunch of instructions I couldn’t remember. I did remember that the pain wasn’t as bad as I thought it

would be. Maybe my pain tolerance had risen. Maybe I was used to being uncomfortable now.

Maybe I should stop being a coward. Maybe I could stop being a coward.