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When the Tide Comes:

A Critical Examination of the Novel-Screenplay Hybrid With Example Chapters

A Thesis Submitted

by

Morgan F. Taylor Moore

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Thesis Committee

Director: Dr. Tess Martinus

Reader: Professor Ruth Ronk

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Dedication

For my sister Kyndal who showed me what a gift stories are and who opened my eyes to a new way of making reading more accessible for everyone. You inspired the entire creation of this project, fangirled over the littlest details, and believed in its worth when I wanted to chuck it.

“I wouldn’t have anything if I didn’t have you.”

And in loving memory of my Uncle Donnie Brewer whose legacy inspired the impetus for this project. I never got to call you uncle in person, but I will forever remember you as the man who, despite a trying childhood, decided to make a difference and raise his family through love and hope. You now know how it feels to be held in the arms of a loving Father.

I look forward to the day I get to hug you myself, Uncle Donnie.

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A writer's process is a solitary journey as we authors are constantly alone in our heads with the characters and worlds we create. At times, it can be a lonely place, but while our processes may be solitary, thanks be to God that our lives are not! For me especially, the Lord saw fit for me to have a team of people who have cheered me on and will continue to be at my side through my writing journey. This page by far does not have adequate space for me to express the deep gratitude I feel for them all, so I will at least highlight in a sentence or two these amazing people in my life.

My parents, Dan and Tanya Moore: You taught me to read and write, hauled me to many a library and creative writing workshop, and guided me through my university studies. I not only literally wouldn't exist without you both, but I also literally wouldn't be a writer without your support. I love you all the way to the moon and past the water fountain.

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My eight brothers and sisters: You know why you're on this page. Thank you for the fangirling/boying, the encouragement, the hugs, the laughs, and for just putting up with me. Special shoutout to my sisters Kyndal and Norah for the video-fan edits and late-night talks and to my brother Russell and youngest sister Lorna for putting up with the author-info-dumping walks. Y'all put the *sane* in *insane*.

My Lord and Savior Jesus Christ: Who has given to You that You should repay? By You, in You, and through You, I am here. To You be the glory forever and ever.

Artist Statement

Summary of Creative Project: *When the Tide Comes*

When the Tide Comes addresses the themes of domestic abuse and the lasting mental trauma experienced by its victims while also raising awareness to other forms of neurodiversity such as ADHD and dyslexia. The idea behind the story is to demonstrate how people with these mental situations struggle to live “normally” and thereby inform readers of these experiences to help them better understand neurodivergent individuals in their own lives in the hopes of showing how to help and live with them. To do this, the novel follows the stories of two families who are very different in upbringing, lifestyle, and worldviews, yet who are brought together by “fortunate events” to provide the healing the other family misses. Redemption, forgiveness, platonic friendships, a small bit of romance, and sibling relationships—both by blood and by bond—receive a lot of focus in these two families’ interactions.

The first family that receives the most “screentime,” if you will, (as they are the primary group that moves the story’s plot and theme forward) is the Griffiths, consisting of three brothers and a single mother—David (age: 27), Ben (age: 25), Jack (age: 16), and Molly (age: 47). While these are their ages when the story begins and progresses, there are also many scenes/flashbacks within the novel that occur when they’re younger and of varying ages. It is with this family that the focus on domestic abuse, mental trauma, and ADHD/dyslexia is observed. Due to her own rough upbringing as a foster child, Molly unwisely became pregnant with David by a man named Miles Griffith. Upon marriage, Miles’s narcissistic nature was revealed as he verbally and emotionally manipulated his wife, and around the time David was eight, Miles resorted to physically abusing David to further control and manipulate Molly. Long story short, the abuse was hidden and permitted to continue until Miles, in a drunken stupor, split Jack’s skull (aged

three at the time) with a beer bottle. Molly finally filed for a divorce and revoked all custody rights from her husband.

With that in mind, the story focuses on the various Griffith members' trauma and how they're trying to live with it: Molly—emotional trauma and guilt; David—PTSD from physical abuse; Ben—CPTSD from verbal abuse and witnessing the abuse of his mother and brother; Jack—ADHD and dyslexia. While Jack's mental disorder is quite different from the rest of his family's, it is this difference that moves the plot forward. It is supposed that both ADHD and dyslexia can be caused by head injuries, and the Griffith family believe Jack's mentality results from his once fractured skull. Because Jack was too young to remember Miles or the toxic situation his brothers grew up in, Molly and his brothers resolved to keep the truth of his father a secret and the abusive environment he created to provide him with the opportunities they never received: the chance to pursue a college education, the freedom to make his own choices, and ultimately, live a trauma-free life. The story follows the family as they struggle to achieve this goal for Jack in their various means while Jack simultaneously seeks to discover the origins of his father, which causes tension among the family.

The second family examined in the book is the Dawes, consisting of the father Mac (age: roughly mid-fifties) and his four daughters June (age: 25), May (age: 23), April (age: 16), and Summer (age: 7). The mother/wife Laura passed away from breast cancer five years before the start of the story and therefore the plot around the Dawes centers on overcoming grief. The owner of a small construction company, Mac learns to adjust pursuing his career without the support of his wife and renames the business in her memory. The girls individually conquer their own internal conflicts based on the absence of their mother. The two families come together through ordinary events, become close friends, and ultimately help each other's individual

healing process, with the Dawes' positive outlook on life providing a light for the pessimistic Griffiths. As the two families become closer, however, and a couple relationships seem to reach more than friends, tension arises as the Griffiths struggle to let go of their past and break the chain their parents' forged; and, as Jack continues to pry on the nails his brothers' hammered into their father's past, the brothers' own relationships threaten to fall apart.

Impetus for the Project

When the Tide Comes is a novel-screenplay hybrid which not only addresses the critical yet often neglected themes of domestic abuse and ADHD, but also is specifically designed through both narrative style and formatting to make reading easier for neurodivergent people. I was inspired to choose this topic and its formatting from three relationships, one personal and two general: my sister, my neighbor, and my adopted uncle.

My sister Kyndal and I are only a year and a half apart in age, and therefore, we are blessed to have a tight knit relationship. Though close in age, I nevertheless approached the big sister role quite seriously growing up, and one of the "tasks" I assigned myself was reading aloud to Kyndal. Both of us are story lovers regardless of the medium (novels, films, plays, etc.), and some of my earliest memories are of us curled together on the couch with a picture book as I read aloud to Kyndal, pointing out the different words with my finger as I read them. As I grew older and discovered my love for writing books of my own, I soon included narrating stories in which Kyndal and I were the main characters, and this later evolved to me physically writing the stories during the day in spiral-bound notebooks that I would later read aloud to her in the evenings after "bedtime." At first, Kyndal's excitement for these made-up tales and her readiness to listen rather than read aloud herself seemed only natural as she was the younger sister, but as she too began to learn how to read, it gradually became clearer to both my parents and to myself

that Kyndal struggled to read on her own. Dyslexia was not the issue as she not only clearly and legibly wrote letters then words, but also could easily pronounce phonetic devices that are often challenging to people with dyslexia (such as blends, prefixes, and suffixes) and read aloud words that were above her reading level. As she transitioned from elementary school to middle school, we gradually became aware that comprehension was the true struggle. Often, my parents would ask her what she had just read, and she would not be able to answer until she returned to the book or to the specific passage within it and read it at least once, if not twice, more. In high school, the joke was that Kyndal would take months to read one book, and she'd be "lucky" if she got through more than seven a year. Thankfully, we were homeschooled, and my mom was able to pay attention to my sister's reading needs by providing as many audiobooks for her as possible, but of course, not all textbooks are published in that medium, and I recall my mother lovingly pushing my sister to get through a book faster so she wouldn't fall behind in her grades.

When my sister began her first semester of college, her struggle with reading comprehension finally reared its head as she fought to keep up with assignment deadlines; it truly was a mental battle for her as she often would come to me in tears as the strict academic schedule not only mentally exhausted her but also physically stressed her body, so she lost necessary weight due to a lack of eating. It was at this time that Kyndal was finally diagnosed with ADHD—Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder—which greatly explained her inability to read quickly: her mind simply could not focus on the words. She would read a paragraph, for example, but not understand a word of it until she had read that same paragraph at least three times. To aid her with this struggle in college, she was guided to read aloud features on online textbooks as well as specific software that would convert written text into audio. Additionally,

she noticed that textbooks which italicized or bolded words and phrases and formatted paragraphs into blocks made her read faster.

It is through this experience of watching Kyndal struggle with reading that inspired me to write a book that she could mentally process. As I mentioned before, we are both lovers of story, and my heart would often ache, however extreme that may sound, when my sister would give up on a novel with characters she loved and desperately wanted to know more about but could no longer endure the frustration of trudging through the words. Indeed, *When the Tide Comes* is a story we created together that she wanted me to write so she could one day hear me read it aloud. However, she one day stumbled upon my notes for the novel that were at the time written as a screenplay, and she came to me in excitement explaining that she not only understood it, but she also comprehended all of it in just one reading. I knew instantly that I wanted to write a book for neurodivergent people, and thus, the novel-screenplay hybrid was born. Through both experimenting on my sister and scientific research, I've discovered that camera angles help with focus, italicized and bold words encourage faster reading, and blocked and short paragraphs are less distracting—which is the formatting of *When the Tide Comes*.

The second relationship that spurred my impetus for this project was a conversation I had with my neighbor regarding his mother-in-law. For roughly five years, his mother-in-law lived with his wife and him due to health issues, but my family and I noticed that we hardly saw her at all. Occasionally, we'd catch a glimpse of her in the driveway if she was getting in a vehicle with her family, but we never saw her enjoying the outdoors as the rest of her relatives or joining them when they visited our home. Eventually, we learned from our neighbor about the obscurity of his mother-in-law, and he sadly explained that it was a daily struggle for her to leave her own room due to her emotional trauma, which was a result of the domestic abuse she received in her

previous marriage. As the years passed and our neighbor became more comfortable discussing his mother-in-law's mental health with us, I learned how she often relapsed into depressive states, refused to eat or drink, and could not speak for days. However, our neighbor explained how he was blessed she lived with them rather than in a care facility for it was through interacting with people who loved her that she managed to endure her emotional trauma before leaving this world in the beginning of 2024. It was through this experience I discovered the horrendous effects of emotional abuse and truly understood how words can tear a person apart. Had I not had these discussions with my neighbor, however, I'm not sure when or if I would have learned about emotional abuse as it seems to be a hidden topic, or rather one that is overshadowed by the more prominent mental health issues. Therefore, my goal with my thesis project is to raise awareness to emotional trauma and encourage people to not only understand the trauma that victims undergo, but also understand how they may better assist these victims so they do not have to be hidden away in mental homes.

Finally, the third relationship driving me to write my thesis is my adopted uncle Donnie Brewer. Uncle Donnie attended high school with my father and ultimately ended up moving in with my grandparents and being accepted into the family due to his father's physical abuse. Though Uncle Donnie passed away before I knew much about him, my father has shared the horror stories of Uncle Donnie's father, Mr. Brewer, thrashing Donnie in a drunken rage and witnessing some of these disgusting beatings himself. Undoubtedly, Uncle Donnie battled emotional trauma of his own yet through God's grace did not repeat his father's habits on his own children, like many abused victims, but instead overcame his trauma and broke free from the horror of Mr. Brewer's legacy. His relationship with his children was not without its rough bumps in the road, but he nevertheless worked hard to conquer his fears and establish a strong

relationship with them. It is my uncle's story of hope and triumph that I wish to share with other abused victims. Too often we hear the tales of abuse survivors never overcoming their anguish but remaining trapped in their trauma, which paints a horrid picture for other survivors looking for hope. Through fictional characters then, I wish to share Uncle Donnie's struggles and his triumphs so as to give hope to countless of abused victims.

Vision for the Project

Like my impetus for this work, my vision for *When the Tide Comes* is threefold. First, I want this novel's style, both in format and in writing voice, to appeal to both neurodivergent and non-neurodivergent readers. As mentioned previously, the idea is that it will help reading become an easier task for those with ADHD while also creating a style that is enjoyable and entertaining for readers of all backgrounds. I have had both a non-neurodivergent friend and a sister read many portions of this project, and thus far, they have attested that the novel-screenplay hybrid style has made them read faster and therefore contribute to the quick pacing this story often has, which made the experience much more enjoyable for them. Using both them and my neurodivergent sister as "experiments" then, I believe this initial goal for this work may be accessible. Second, I seek to encourage trauma survivors through the work's message. I touched on this point in my impetus section, but again, I wish to demonstrate through the characters' struggles and triumphs that trauma victims are not alone. As trauma is often a mental experience, it is easy for survivors to be neglected or ignored or to feel themselves as if they are alone in their pain. It is therefore my goal to accurately reflect the struggles of domestic abuse victims not only so that they may know that others feel their pain, but also to demonstrate what these people experience to raise awareness to their conditions and thereby equip others with ideas on how to help and support these victims. Finally, I wish to raise awareness of the false portrayals of those

with ADHD while encouraging neurodivergent people to be themselves and learn how to function in a world designed for neurotypical people. Too often the media depicts ADHD experiencers as ignorant and easily distracted by “shiny” items, using them as the comedy relief characters in films, TV shows, and even advertisements. They are the ones with the “squirrely” brains and the hyperactive dialogue, talking way too fast and way too much over basic items or random topics. This false depiction has caused many neurodivergent people to not only feel misrepresented but also believe they borderline being classified as psychotic, for in reality, most of them are often quiet as they silently battle obsessive and intrusive thoughts while simultaneously undergoing depression, anxiety, and imposter syndrome. It is my vision then to accurately represent through two characters in *When the Tide Comes* what neurodivergent individuals often mentally experience and how they act. Through this depiction, I hope to help those with ADHD not only feel understood and heard but also give them ideas on how they may understand themselves, communicate their emotions and thoughts to others, and work in environments that are typically designed for neurotypical people. I also hope that others will learn how the ADHD brain functions and help them understand this condition, thereby inspiring them to better know their neurodivergent relatives and/or friends and offer them support.

Literary Context for Project

Regarding the literary context for this project, my inspiration is a mixture of poets and authors. Because of the nature of my thesis, the writing primarily focuses on both glorifying the simple things of life and exemplifying some of humanity’s trials that are often considered trivial. For example, many stories, particularly those of the fantastical or adventure genre, elevate the grandiose or describe tribulations as physical battles between man and man or man against the bestial. However, may not a broken shell washed upon the shore demonstrate the redemptive

nature of Christ just as much as a grandiose allegory, and may not the struggle of getting out of bed for those battling depression be as painful as those in physical combat? Such answers to questions of this essence are what I will address and describe in my project, much like my two favorite poets Emily Dickinson and Robert Frost. In their poetry, they focus on exemplifying nature and humanity's inner turmoil for both theological and sociological purposes, which is what I mimic through characters' actions and poetic descriptions in *When the Tide Comes*. I also will emulate, through a Christian mindset, Victorian author Henry James's psychological realism approach to craft a story that is character-driven rather than plot-driven while simultaneously mimicking both his and the Modernist author William Faulkner's interior monologue style in *As I Lay Dying* through my usage of the second person to likewise imitate the stream-of-consciousness narrative technique. Additionally, this project will draw much inspiration from Charles Dickens's symbolic writing style, specifically the style of *A Tale of Two Cities*, to either emphasize a specific image or subtly indicate a theological message.

Christian Significance of the Project

As a Christian scholar, the topic of my project is significant to me in multiple ways. First and foremost, my thesis will fulfill scripture's commandment to make writing, in both the physical action and its written form, glorify Christ Jesus: "And whatever you do, in word or in deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him" (*New American Bible, Revised Edition*, Col. 3:17). Although my project will not fall under the Christian fiction genre, it nevertheless focuses on pointing the readers to the Lord through symbolically painting the redemptive work of Christ in nature and by demonstrating through the characters' triumphs that hope is found not within humanity but in a higher power. As mentioned previously, I also will imitate many of the themes of Victorian and Modernist authors, yet unlike

the Modernists who saw humanity as hopeless animals that will only return to dust, I will subtly show how these themes point to Christ. This is significant to me not only so that I may fulfill the Great Commission, but also because I agree with Modernist scholars that literature should portray both the fantastical and the ordinary; yet I believe that the ordinary should be considered extraordinary as the Lord Jesus has forever altered the fate of mankind through His redeeming love. Furthermore, the sole focus of my project is to raise awareness to the needs of broken and misunderstood individuals to encourage those who are suffering by reminding them of the hope found in Jesus Christ to fulfill Christ's commandment to love my neighbor as myself. Yet, as I've mentioned, I also hope readers in general will become aware of the problems that neurodivergent people and abused victims experience to inspire readers to help those they may know enduring these issues, thereby encouraging all to remember that we are indeed our brothers' keepers (Gen. 4:9).

Critical Paper

Introduction

As mentioned previously, my thesis project *When the Tide Comes* is an adult contemporary novel-screenplay hybrid that seeks to raise awareness to mental health disorders and, more specifically, the psychological effects of domestic abuse victims and neurodivergent (ADHD/Autism) individuals. As a project dealing with such critical themes, extensive research has been taken not only to accurately portray the specific emotions and/or events of these disorders, but also to properly represent individuals whom this project is based upon while providing neurodivergent readers with a book designed for their reading needs. Yet while my project is set in the present day and requires modern research, it nevertheless mimics literary techniques of the past and aims to recapture specific literary themes that have been largely lost in contemporary publications. This paper will therefore present my research on the psychological realism genre, the stream of consciousness narrative technique, the usage of second person and the present tense, the biblical reasoning behind depicting the ordinary as extraordinary, the role of the demonic in domestic violence, the incorporation of screenplay styles, the scientific reasoning and personal findings of the project's formatting, the examination of primary sources (novels) that have inspired my project, and finally, the research on ADHD, PTSD, and C-PTSD as the results of domestic abuse.

Psychological Realism Genre

As an adult contemporary novel focused on the themes of mental disorders, my project *When the Tide Comes* draws heavily from the components of the psychological realism genre. Known for being created by Victorian author Henry James and further analyzed and studied by his psychologist brother William James, psychological realism emphasizes a focus on character

development rather than on an engaging plot (Ruthrof 371). According to Henry James, the unfolding of a character's development far exceeds in importance and interest the mere incidents of a novel's plot as the focus on character, specifically the psychology of the character, slows the pacing of the novel and discourages brevity, which Ruthrof explains is a common result among "traditional fast-paced narratives" otherwise known as plot-centered novels (371, 372). In his preface on how he wrote his novel *The Awkward Age*, for example, James notes that he purposefully made every minute detail within the story matter to the characters' development in order to accentuate his novel's message: "a single 'social occasion' in the history and intercourse of the characters concerned would bring out to the full the latent colour of the scene in question and cause it to illustrate, to the last drop, its bearing on my theme" (87).

Because of this concentration on character, Ruthrof writes how psychological realism naturally abandoned traditional literary techniques which focused on describing the succession of external events and instead presented "subtle psychic nuances" to show how the inner narrative, or one's personal thoughts, contribute to both a "precarious [situation] [and] existence" (369). Since the personal thoughts of a character are to be stressed in this writing style, James believed that a novel's themes should develop slowly throughout the story and should focus heavily on the gradual development of the characters, thereby creating a longer and slow-paced work (370). Because every detail mattered to James, he often wrote lengthy works, and sometimes, his chapters and scenes were considered unnecessary or dull (James 87). However, as James describes in his preface, his approach was to view novel writing similar to playwriting in that each act must be successive of the other and move the story forward, yet each act must also include details that "drag out odds and ends from the 'mere' storyteller's great property-shop of aids to illusion: a resource under denial of which it was equally perplexing and delightful, for a

change, to proceed” (87). Therefore, as James says, literally everything in the story, from the character’s actions to his mere thoughts, becomes interesting (87). At times, the reader does not even recognize that a plot device or a small detail progresses the character’s development—hence James in the previous quote describing storytellers as providing “aids to illusion”—yet they nevertheless remain interesting and vital details for the story’s theme.

However, James did not believe that a concentration on a character’s internal monologue should be random or thoughtless but rather a purposeful focus on what Ruthrof calls the “complex psychological structures which entail great detail and suffer under rigorous compression” through realistic and commonly experienced themes (370). These themes thereby create internal conflict in a character (which many readers find appealing) and include, but are not limited to, seeking experience, avoiding illumination, and growing or decaying love (370). Indeed, James attests that *intentionally* including the psychology of the character, which results in longer narratives, is necessary for characters to feel realistic and relatable to the readers. To illustrate his point, he again uses the example of plays in which poor actors make the viewer distant from the characters: “If ‘John Gabriel Borkmann’ is but a pennyworth of effect as to a character we can imagine much more amply presented, and if ‘Hedda Gabler’ makes an appeal enfeebled by remarkable vagueness, there is by the nature of the case no catching the convinced, or call him the deluded, spectator or reader in the act of a mistake” (88). Overall, then, psychological realism produces works that are often long and strictly focus on the life and growth of characters.

Yet while psychological realism appears straightforward at a glance, James did not merely write novels about characters but wrote novels *through* characters. H.G. Ruthrof explains that James contrived the idea of “central intelligence,” which is an “indirect presentation” of the

novel's plot and the characters' development. Through centering the narrative around a character's consciousness and what the character himself, not the reader or the narrative, "sees, conceives, [and] interprets" and how he perceives the events of the book, James creates a quasi-reality for his readers, a reality that is interpreted and filtered through the character's point of view (Ruthrof 371). Therefore, the subject of the story no longer is on *what* happened but on what the *character* believes has happened so that the character's psyche now becomes the present world; or, as Ruthrof says, "action in the traditional sense is replaced by a string of reflections on reality experienced and directly conveyed by the central persona" (371). In other words, the reader sees the fictional setting and the other characters solely through the eyes of the character's point of view—not through the narrator or other characters' perception, as traditionally done. Therefore, James's approach naturally must focus on the character's brain, which is how he develops his characters. Unlike traditional novels that focus on developing or describing a character's personality and physical appearance through descriptions, James sought to mimic how people in reality learn about and judge other persons, which is through actions and thought, or as Ruthrof says, "by accumulating gradually more and more minute and subtle indications, hardly recognizable aspects and fragments of his psyche" (371). Indeed, Jessica Sommer expounds when analyzing James's *The Turn of the Screw* how character performance is essential in understanding a story's themes and plot. Using the example of characters in an opera, Sommer explains that the audience understands the performance through the actor's interaction with other actors, the movement of their bodies, and their dialogue. In the same way, a reader understands a story through the characters' physical action, speech, and their perception of the other characters, which is the approach James takes (Sommer). James himself said that through supplying the reader with the character's thought process, the reader better understands the story

as the reader ultimately becomes the character through digesting his or her mentality: “make the reader’s general vision of evil intense enough [through the character’s experience] . . . his own experience, his own imagination, his own sympathy. . . will supply him quite sufficiently with all the particulars. Make him think the evil, make him think it for himself, and you are released from weak specifications” (qtd in Sommer). Psychological realism, then, can be perceived as a story told in a character’s mind and, while not necessarily written in first person, reads from that character’s perspective.

It is this focus on psychological details that make psychological realist novels longer than plot-driven novels as the time lapse of events tends to take longer than usual. James called this the difference between “narrated time” and “narrating time,” with narrated time being the traditional narrative approach (Ruthrof 372). Narrating time, on the other hand, is when the author minutely depicts the character’s thoughts and emotions to suspend time, thereby making the particular moment longer for the reader to read than the event would potentially be if it took place in reality (372). Another reason that his novels tended to be of greater length is that James preferred to take a broad stream of thought and focus on one particular detail or thought to better give a “full portrait of an individual, rather than grasping one human situation in its density and poignancy” (372). This thereby better mimics a person’s thought process as we humans tend to hyper fixate or harp on one particular moment in either our day or our entire life that possibly ruined or bettered that specific time.

In summary, James’s approach to the psychological realist genre is what my project *When the Tide Comes* mimics. His psychological themes of experiences, avoiding illumination, and the growth or decay of love is what my novel-screenplay hybrid specifically addresses as my characters either seek or are forced into new experiences, avoid overcoming their personal

trauma, and both pursue and reject romantic relationships. The story is also written in second person limited so that the audience only perceives other characters and events through a specific character's perspective until the point of view is switched, which thereby reveals a different perspective on the very exact event or character. I also focus on particular details or a specific event rather than narrate a broad spectrum of thoughts as this not only better mimics the hyperfixation experienced by those with ADHD, but also represents my theme of expounding upon the small things in life to reveal how they are grander than most people perceive (both of which are further discussed later in this paper). Additionally, I slow down time specifically when describing mental events such as panic attacks or flashbacks for, in reality, a person experiencing these traumatic events often feels as if time has either stopped or dragged on when in actuality the event only took a few moments.

Stream of Consciousness Narrative Technique

While heavily relying on Henry James's approach to psychological realism, *When the Tide Comes* more specifically will encapsulate the technique practiced by most authors of psychological realism which is the stream of consciousness narrative technique. The editors of the Encyclopedia Britannica define the stream of consciousness technique as when an author captures a character's consciousness rather than just his or her rational thought process. This is done to represent a realistic yet chaotic stream of human thought through random lines of prose/ideas that jar the narrative, ungrammatical structures, a collection of memories, and words at the "pre-speech level" (Editors of the Encyclopedia Britannica). Furthermore, the author focuses on encapsulating "the flow of myriad impressions," which include auditory, visual, physical, associative, and subconscious events that form a character's awareness and rationalistic thought (Editors of the Encyclopedia Britannica). An example of an author utilizing this method

is Modernist author William Faulkner. Faulkner uses the stream of consciousness technique frequently in *As I Lay Dying* through writing in the first person and describing scattered thoughts (Parvathi and Harinath). For example, he writes in his character's Darl's perspective "I am I and you are you and I know it and you don't know it and you could do so much for me if you just would and if you just would then I could tell you and then nobody would have to know it except you and me and Darl" (Faulkner qtd in Parvathi and Harinath). As this example illustrates, Faulkner utilizes a great many run-on sentences to accurately portray a person's random thoughts and even talking to himself. Yet Faulkner further contributes to the stream of consciousness narrative technique not only by writing from the inward thoughts of each character, but also through sometimes making each character have a vague one line of thought. For example, Faulkner's "chapter" dedicated to the first-person perspective of Vardaman consists solely of one line: "My mother is a fish" (Faulkner 49). Here, the narrative is solely explained by the character's thought process as readers have to assume based on Vardaman's personal experience what he means by this statement and why he perceives his mother in this way.

The stream of consciousness narrative technique, as well as Faulkner's specific interpretation of this method, is employed heavily in my project *When the Tide Comes* in the points of view of my traumatized characters. *Trauma* is a term widely used today and, more often than not, an abused one, yet I refer to *trauma* in both this critical paper and my project in its true medical sense, which is a word meaning "wound or hurt" caused by either direct involvement with or by witnessing extremely stressful situations such as physical combat and/or abuse, sexual assault, emotional violence and/or abuse, and the death of a loved one (Feriante and Sharma). With this definition in mind, the stream of consciousness narrative technique is a fitting writing style when portraying the mental processes of traumatized individuals. Run-on sentences and the

purposeful incorrect usage of commas to create comma splices are frequently scattered throughout the narrative in order to not only accurately represent human thought, but also to portray the mental spirals of abandonment, anxiety, despair, grief, and loneliness experienced by those with the psychological disorders my project addresses. Moreover, the randomness of and the ability to ramble that the stream of consciousness narrative technique provides enables me to create the feeling of the characters living in a quasi-reality which not only further simulates James's psychological approach of making an almost alternate realism, but also represents the other reality that those undergoing emotional trauma often create for themselves, commonly known as disassociation. Trauma consultant Elena Engle explains how disassociation can manifest itself as either depersonalization, which is a "sense of detachment from oneself," or derealization, "where the external world feels unreal or distorted." Often, trauma survivors unconsciously fall into these mental traps for, as they become overwhelmed with emotions, their minds naturally form a psychological defense, resulting in disassociation (Engle). However, while disassociation may manifest itself as either depersonalization or derealization, there are four categories of symptoms that fall under these two groups (Engle). Engle describes them as follows:

1. **Fragmented sense of self:** A person who suffered childhood abuse may struggle with a fragmented sense of self, feeling as though different parts of their identity are disconnected or contradictory. They may experience internal conflicts, shifting beliefs, and a lack of continuity in their self-perception.
2. **Disrupted memory:** Traumatic experiences can disrupt the normal functioning of memory. For example, a survivor of a car accident may have fragmented memories of the event, with certain details vividly recalled while others remain elusive or

- completely forgotten. Trauma-related dissociation hinders the integration of memories into a coherent narrative.
3. **Perception of reality:** Trauma can distort an individual's perception of reality. For instance, a combat veteran who experienced intense warfare may struggle with derealization, where the external world feels surreal or distorted. They may feel disconnected from their surroundings, as if living in a dream or alternate reality.
 4. **Fragmented fragments:** Traumatic experiences can be stored as fragmented fragments in memory rather than integrated narratives. For instance, a survivor of a physical assault may recall disjointed sensory details, such as sounds, smells, or visual flashes, without a clear chronological sequence. The dissociative response to trauma can result in fragmented memories that are difficult to piece together into a cohesive story. (Engle)

As my novel-screenplay hybrid focuses on these trying experiences and seeks to offer hope, accurately representing trauma survivors' mental processes is of tremendous importance for this project. Therefore, the ability to mimic a person's random thoughts that the stream of consciousness narrative technique provides will enable me to replicate the various forms of quasi-realities that traumatized individuals create for themselves.

Second Person and the Present Tense

When writing a novel, one of the most important questions an author must ask himself is what point of view to write in as both the tone and the personability of the novel—or lack thereof—greatly differs with each point of view (known as first, second, and third person). Traditionally, the first person evokes a more personal experience as the reader typically perceives himself either within the narrator's head or listening to a narrator while the third person creates a

more objective, outsider approach. On the other hand, second person is a fine balance between the former two perspectives and formulates a more psychological reading experience. According to Michael Pauen, the second person creates a psychological tone because it “provides a unique kind of access to certain facts, namely other persons’ mental states, particularly, but not only, in social contexts” (2). Pauen then explains that the first person is subjective and only gives an audience the perspective of a certain object or subject through that character’s subjective opinions and experiences. The third person, on the other hand, “is based on objective evidence and gives access to all kinds of entities [that] [are] objective” whereas the second person is a fine balance between both, known as “intersubjective” (2). The intersubjective arises as the second person relies on the individual experiences and opinions of a character yet also incorporates the independent mentality of either another character and/or the narrator. It then turns the objective thought of those persons into subjective emotions and thereby creates “a basic self/other distinction and a basic awareness of the relevant perspectival differences between the [subjective and objective]” (2). In other words, the second person “is a perspective on a perspective” (2). The second person therefore can create a defamiliarizing effect, which further emphasizes my project’s theme as it discusses the defamiliarizing repercussions victims of emotional and physical abuse have endured, as discussed in the previous section.

The second person’s emphasis on the psychological, however, does not render it emotionless or expressionless but in fact increases its ability to stimulate a personal connection with the reader. Indeed, Joel Bahr, a developmental editor at Amazon Publishing, says that there’s an additional intimacy of the second person that the first person cannot bring: “Well, second person is a cut closer than first person because readers actually are the character. Even the minimal distance created between reader and character created by the phrase, ‘I thought’ is

refined further in second person. In this closer POV, there is no ‘I thought,’ but rather this is how you—we, really—think.” (qtd. in Reedsyblog). He goes on to explain how the 1980s novel *Bright Lights, Big City* by James McInerney, which was the first full-length novel to use second person, attaches the reader to the character even more than the first person: “In this instance, [the] first person is inviting the reader to believe what they’re telling them. [The] second person takes the ‘ask’ off the table. There is no debate about what kind of person you are or if these actions happened. You are, and they did, and we know that because there is no functional difference between the reader and the character” (Bahr, qtd. in Reedsyblog). Another novel which shocked the literary world with its usage of the second person is *If On a Winter’s Night* by Italo Calvino. Published in 1979, the book alternates between the second person and the third person for each chapter, and Manu Mangattu notes that, as with McInerney’s work, the second person makes the reader feel “a part of some infinitely complex system of self-awareness. It sends you into a whirlpool of self-reflection where the book folds in on itself and implodes” (1). With this perception in mind, it can be rightfully concluded that the second person offers an intimate perspective to an audience that the first and third persons may find more challenging as the second person encourages readers to think of not only the characters but also to think of themselves *as* the characters.

Just as the second person evokes its audience to reconsider certain perspectives, so too does the present tense encourage its readers to perceive time in a new way. Yet unlike the second person, the present tense is more conventional—so much so that author Philip Pullman declared in 2010 that the present tense would take over literature; and indeed, since 2010, the book industry has seen a surge in the usage of the present tense (Lea). This increase of the present tense’s popularity appears to be the result of the tense being more personable for readers and

writers alike. Historical fiction author Kevin Barry says he prefers writing in the present tense as it “plunge[s] the reader directly into the cauldron of an artist’s mind, and certainly the present tense is very effective in such a case. . . Writers, just like everyone else, are so intensely mediated by online, television, and film cultures now, it tends to feel like the natural tense to write in” (qtd in Lea). Likewise, author Hilary Mantel explains that the present tense makes the characters feel more realistic because it captures “the jitter and flux of events, the texture of them and their ungraspable speed” (qtd. in Lea). Additionally, Mantel believes that the present tense creates both a humble and realistic tone for, unlike the past tense which may give the persona of a demanding or God-like author, the present tense makes the reader feel as they are “inside or very close by [the] characters, and sharing their focus, their limited perceptions” (qtd in Lea).. Overall, then, the present tense, like the second person, creates a personal experience for readers as it gives the perception of the novel’s events happening at the exact moment and makes them feel as if they share the characters’ physical and emotional experiences.

It is because of the above explanations that my project *When the Tide Comes* is written in the second person present tense. As a novel of the psychological realism genre and a story that raises awareness to mental health, the psychological effects that the second person stimulates not only matches my project in theme but also encourages the quasi-reality feeling this style produces. Yet, as discussed, the second person also encourages a personal relationship with readers as they both relate to the characters and perceive themselves as the characters, which further aids my impetus for my project to bring assistance and hope to those struggling with ADHD and mental trauma.

On Making the Ordinary Extraordinary

As discussed throughout the previous sections of this critical paper, modeling psychological realism, applying the stream of consciousness narrative technique, and using the second person to create a personal yet quasi-reality narrative all results in a longer, and sometimes what modern readers might consider “drawn out,” narrative. Yet while my project’s chapters are lengthy due to the writing style, they also are long due to a purposeful fixation on what some would deem as small or insignificant details for the purpose of subtly implementing my Catholic faith into the text. More specifically, I highlight what the modern internet trend calls “romanticizing everyday life” but what my personal faith convictions describes as making the ordinary extraordinary.

In our modern society, the popular trend of “romanticizing everyday life” refers to personal routines and hobbies that serve to dress up everyday commodities and chores through little things in life with the express purpose of making individuals “fall deeply and compassionately in love with [who] they are” and find contentment in their daily lifestyles (Eyman). Some of these little things include making one’s morning coffee a little extra special, curating cozy workspaces, slow living, and dressing up a shopping list with gel pens and inspiring notebooks (Eyman). In other words, society seems to be searching for purpose in ordinary objects, and though a Christian argument can be raised against this trend as people appear to be searching for pleasure in materials rather than through a faith in Christ, it nevertheless indicates a growing appreciation within individuals for the ordinary instead of seeking pleasure through expensive thrills.

It is this romantic trend of making the ordinary extraordinary which I emphasize throughout my project but through a Catholic worldview. In Catholicism, the little things count,

but most importantly, Catholics understand that it is the representation of *what* the little “stuff” is that counts, such as the intrinsic meaning behind the seemingly common objects of wedding rings, bread, wine, and water. This Catholic belief of the ordinary being extraordinary Catholic author George Weigel likes to describe as the *sacramental imagination* due to how Catholicism perceives what most consider ordinary objects as sacraments:

Catholicism takes the world, and the things of the world, far more seriously than those who like to think themselves worldly. Water, salt, and oil are the tangibles by which sanctifying Grace is conferred in the sacrament of Baptism; bread and wine are the materials through which Christ gives His body and blood to His people in the sacrament of the Holy Eucharist; in the sacrament of matrimony, the consummation of marital love completes the vows exchanged at a Catholic couple’s wedding; oil brings healing in the sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick, as it conveys the gift of the Holy Spirit in the sacrament of Confirmation. And all of this happens not by Harry Potter-like wizardry, but because the world was *sacramentally configured by God from the start* [Gen.1:1]—and still is today . . . What we experience here—in what skeptics call the “real world”—is a window into the *really* real world that makes this world possible, the world of transcendent Truth and Love. The ordinary stuff of the world is the material God uses to bring us into communion with the truly extraordinary—with God Himself. (Weigel 92-93)

Spiritually, then, the ordinary things of life can hold great value not because we find pleasure in them (though we often do) but because God uses common events and objects to draw us closer to Him, or as Weigel puts it above, in greater communion with Him. This is the perspective through which I have written *When the Tide Comes*, and I integrate this belief in various ways.

Sometimes, it is through romantic descriptions of how light comes through the windows or by taking the time to write narratives of ordinary family lifestyles, specifically the ups and downs of sibling relationships from arguments to making one another laugh. In the sample chapters of this project, for example, there are places where the Griffith brothers argue with each other, give one another “pep talks,” and a moment where I include them fooling around together and making one another laugh. While these parts are, of course, intentionally included within the narrative to show characters’ personalities, relationships with each other, foreshadowing, and small story beats, I also integrate them to subtly show how small family interactions which many often take for granted are the Lord’s way of directing our attention to His grandiose relationship with us. Siblings, for example, are specifically given for the purpose of assisting one another in difficult times (Prov. 17:17) which reflects Christ’s (who is our spiritual brother) promise to never leave His people (Heb.13:5), and laughter, that natural medicine (Prov. 17:22) which is often shared among siblings, is directly created by God Himself (Job 8:21). Though not included in the sample chapters of this thesis, my novel primarily focuses on displaying joy in the little things in life through the Dawes family. As a family with healthy relationships and an implied Catholic faith, their narratives and worldviews are specifically portrayed as optimistic to contrast with the more often than not pessimistic Griffiths in order to symbolize Christ’s sanctifying grace as the Dawes’s worldview begins to rub off on the Griffiths when closer relationships form.

Yet while I do highlight the beauty of ordinary events, my Catholic perspective of perceiving the ordinary as extraordinary also results in typifying unpleasant mental struggles and, at times, even sin to make readers aware of the gripping and often dangerous effects these situations have upon the lives of individuals. Because of our emphasis on the sacramental imagination—where the ordinary becomes extraordinary—some assume that Catholics are

“uneasy in the world, that Catholicism demeans the world and the flesh” like Gnosticism or deny the harsh reality of our fallen world in exchange for a sort of “La La Land” (Weigel 92). This could not be further from the truth for a sacramental imagination actually makes one more aware of the brokenness of our world, specifically through how the devil attacks individuals through what most deem “simple” or unimportant influences such as obsessive thoughts and doubts (Mercier). Accentuating the various forms of mental battles—panic attacks, anxiety, obsessive and obtrusive thoughts, flashbacks, and so on—plays a primary role in my project and thereby contributes to the prolonged duration many of my chapters and scenes take. Though as previously mentioned I do so to realistically portray the human mind, I also wish to emphasize just how controlling and trialing these mental situations can be and demonstrate how the ordinary struggles such as rising from bed in the morning, going to a new school, or fighting to fall asleep are indeed trials extraordinary as hiking Mount Doom or fighting on battlefields as they are means by which the devil seeks to bring us down. However, while I strive to depict these mental trials as raw and realistic as possible and include elements of “worldliness” (profanity and occasionally implied sensuality), I do so with the express purpose of portraying how readers in similar situations may find hope for “[w]orldliness is no bad thing, if by ‘worldliness’ we mean taking seriously the stuff of the world, most especially including the lives and loves, passions and commitments of ordinary, unexceptional people” (Weigel 94). And it is by depicting the extraordinary battles of ordinary, unexceptional people that the contrast can shine all the brighter: we are created by an exceptional God who gives us ordinary, everyday joys so we may anticipate the extraordinary joys of heaven.

With this sacramental imagination that evokes an awareness of extraordinary occurrences transpiring in ordinary means, whether that be moral or sinful, comes an understanding of how

prevalent a role spiritual warfare plays in an individual's life, specifically Satan's desire to destroy Christians and individuals in general through demonic oppression, which often manifests itself as domestic abuse, a weighty topic which my project addresses. It must first be understood, however, the difference between demonic *oppression* and demonic *possession*. The latter is obviously the most known form not only due to the biblical narratives of Christ casting out demons, but also due to Hollywood's dramatic films such as *The Exorcist* which has led to the false assumption that this is the primary form through which demonic forces prey on individuals (Catholic Truth). However, while demonic possession is quite real and quite terrifying as it is when a demon literally takes possession of an individual's body (not his soul), demonic possession is actually rare and occurs from extreme circumstances (Catholic Truth). Demonic *oppression*, on the other hand, occurs through various means (the most familiar among Christians being temptation) including obsessive and intrusive thoughts, emotional manipulation, and violence (Catholic Truth). These three are what I imply when referring to demonic oppression and what my project addresses, especially through the form of domestic violence.

A prominent question heard among Christians and well-meaning individuals alike when discussing domestic abuse is what could possibly possess an individual to harm an innocent child or loved one, and often this question lacks a satisfactory answer. The involvement of demonic activity in domestic abuse only seems logical and, shall we say, even natural as domestic violence—emotional, physical, and verbal—is not only a sin in and of itself, but it also is in complete opposition to God's design for the family. In a biblical commentary, Matthew Henry explains how the fall of man has perverted the Lord's beautiful design of the roles of husbands and wives in Genesis 3:16: "If man had not sinned, he would always have ruled with wisdom and love; and, if the woman had not sinned, she would have always obeyed in humility and

meeekness; and then the dominion would have no grievance; but our own sin and folly made our yoke heavy” (qtd. in Cassidy-Shaw and Koeing 39). Christ Himself testified that a house divided against itself would fall (Matt. 12:25), and Satan, the one who comes only to steal and destroy (John 10:1), desires nothing more than to separate husbands and wives, parents and children. In fact, authors Amelia Cassidy-Shaw and Harold Koeing in their book *Family Abuse and the Bible: The Scriptural Perspective* explain that, because “Satan always attempts to penetrate the ‘internal’ realm,” a marriage that is not Christ-centered is subject to Satan’s attack as “the very nature of the marital relationship is outside of God’s plan” and thereby devoid of the Holy Spirit’s protection (39-40). If a marriage is severed as Christ described and the protection from the Holy Spirit absent, it is little wonder that the devil would seek to tear a family apart through violent means.

With a marriage vulnerable, demonic oppression can thereby attack in the various forms of domestic abuse. After all, the Lord proclaims in Malachi that He hates divorce and “him who covers himself with violence” (Mal. 2:16). In another commentary, Matthew Henry explains that it is no coincidence that scripture includes violence and marriage within the same verse: “In [this passage] they covered violence with their garment; they abused their wives and were vexations to them and yet, in the sight of others, they pretended to be very loving to them and tender to them, and to cast a skirt over them. It is common for those who do violence to advance some specious pretense or other wherewith to cover it as with a garment” (qtd. in Cassidy-Shaw and Koeing 62). Indeed, what psychologists have deemed “the cycle of an abusive relationship” appears to mimic what Christ describes in the New Testament as the cycle of demonic oppression and, ultimately, possession (Cassidy-Shaw and Koeing 77). According to psychologists, the cycle of an abusive relationship begins with the “tension phase,” in which the abused partner notices

signs of anger and violence within the abuser, progresses to the “abuse phase,” in which the abuser releases the violence for as long as he sees fit, before finally landing in the “honeymoon stage,” in which the abuser is suddenly overwhelmed with remorse and shame and demonstrates both physical and emotional love to his partner, often promising to never commit violence again (77). The cycle then repeats but, with the return of each cycle, the abuse phase becomes longer and intensifies until the honeymoon phase completely dissolves, leaving the victim trapped in the tension and abusive phases (77). Likewise, Christ describes the pattern of demonic possession in a similar fashion in the Gospel of Luke:

When a strong man, fully armed, guards his own house, his possessions are secure. But when someone stronger than he attacks him and overpowers him, that man takes away his armor on which he had relied and distributes his plunder. The one who is not with Me is against Me; and the one who does not gather with Me scatters. When the unclean spirit comes out of a person, it passes through waterless places seeking rest, and not finding any, it then says, “I will return to my house from which I came.” And when it comes, it finds it swept and put in order. Then it goes and brings along seven other spirits more evil than itself, and they come in and live there; and the last condition of that person becomes worse than the first. (Luke 11:21-26)

It appears, then, that demonic oppression plays a large role in domestic abuse and possibly continues to linger within a victim’s life. According to exorcist Father Ripperger, demonic oppression also occurs through obsessive and intrusive thoughts with the goal of making the victim doubt his value and feel trapped within his own mind: “[The demons] hope the person will play the victim when it happens . . . it means when something really bad happens in their life, they’ll just think ‘look at what’s happening, there’s nothing I can do about this, it keeps

recurring, everything I do isn't working.' [The demons] give it over so they can just miraa over the person's life or be unimpeded. That's their goal" (Sensus Fidelium). Of course, as Father Ripperger explains, a fine line must be drawn between legitimate mental health disorders and demonic oppression, and one should never immediately assume demon manipulation when discussing mental trauma and health (Sensus Fidelium). Nevertheless, due to domestic violence being under the influence of the demonic, it can be assumed that victims may suffer from lingering oppression as the devil continually seeks to wreak havoc on their lives.

It is this approach of demonic oppression influencing domestic abuse that I incorporate in my project. However, like Father Ripperger, I do not solely describe the characters' trauma as being a result of demonic interaction nor do I assert that the demonic is the cause of mental health disorders. I do, however, give slight suggestions of demonic influence within my novel for both hyperbolic narrative descriptions and to further demonstrate making the ordinary extraordinary as the goal of this project is to raise awareness to domestic violence, as previously mentioned. In the example chapters within this project, this is done through descriptions of the abusive father as almost monster-like, suggestions of the devil-shoulder-angel archetype in flashbacks, and somewhat haunting language within memories that continually plague specific characters.

Incorporation of Screenplay Style

As mentioned throughout this paper, my chosen project is a novel-screenplay hybrid as screenplay techniques are interwoven throughout a traditional narrative style. The two techniques of screenwriting that I specifically use in my project are camera directions and narrative dialogue.

In addition to raising awareness to domestic violence, the goal of my project is to highlight the struggles of ADHD in order to help both neurodivergent readers (a term used to describe people whose brains have developed or work differently) and neurotypical people better understand this mindset and thereby either better understand themselves or their loved ones. Because of my passion for raising awareness to neurodivergent conditions and encouraging those affected by them through the struggles and triumphs of fictional characters, this project's format is written specifically to aid non-neurotypical's reading comprehension, hence the incorporation of a screenplay's camera angles. It is commonly known among neurodivergent people that reading is a struggle due to their minds being easily distracted, which results in them missing important information. Dr. Scott Shapiro, a specialist in ADHD among adults, therefore recommends that non-neurotypical readers engage with the text through asking themselves questions or writing comments on what they have read and attempt to summarize every paragraph by "designat[ing] one word or a simple phrase that represents the material" (Shapiro). The idea of these tricks is to stimulate comprehension and a faster reading pace (Shapiro). Additionally, I have observed through both interacting and interviewing my sister Kyndal who has ADHD that straightforward, concrete directions help neurodivergent people focus and understand the tasks before them. Through combining these three ideas—engagement with the text, summarizing paragraphs in a word, and clear directions—I have concluded, upon feedback from my sister reading this style of writing, that camera directions within the text encourage reading comprehension and speed. After all, camera angles are specific instructions that inform the cameraman which direction he must focus on, and therefore, the camera directions in the novel serve as tools to tell neurodivergent where and how to focus. This is why my project utilizes the two most directive angles: "focus on" and "cut to." However, I will at times include

more interactive directions such as “zoom in” or “zoom out,” which also encourages Shapiro’s idea of engagement with the text. Additionally, camera angles are written in all-caps which naturally catches one’s attention, thereby further aiding the focus of neurodivergent readers.

While screenplay directions are the primary aspect of the hybridity of this project, *When the Tide Comes* also includes the screenplay tradition of using specific forms of dialogue to convey the story in lieu of descriptive narrative. Again, non-neurotypical people find it difficult to focus on written text, and I discovered in an interview with my sister that one common struggle amongst those with ADHD is becoming distracted or “lost” in a novel’s exposition:

I focus better on dialogue. Dialogue is usually short and to the point and gives me the freedom to imagine. Because, you know, dialogue usually doesn’t have a lot of descriptions except for the who said what parts, so I get through it faster since it’s short. Also, I can easily imagine what the characters are doing, where they are, and how they look. I don’t like being *told* what to imagine like the descriptions in narrative usually do. Dialogue doesn’t really command you all that much. (Moore)

Furthermore, a post on Reddit entitled “How to Read with ADHD” sparked an entire conversation amongst neurodivergent readers with the majority of them claiming that, in addition to listening to audio books which mimics dialogue in that one hears spoken words, dialogue in novels is easier for them to read as it allows them freedom to imagine, which is a form of engaging with the text. Again, my project is designed to ease the reading process for neurodivergent people, yet it also seeks to assist those enduring mental abuse and therefore cannot fully omit narrative descriptions if it is to appeal to neurotypical readers as well. Therefore, the balance between these two forms of writing is to include the screenplay’s approach to writing dialogue.

Within screenplays, dialogue has several functions yet the three I explicitly draw from are anchorage of the diegesis and characters, communication of narrative causality, and enactment of narrative events, also known as verbal events. According to screenwriter Sarah Kozloff, anchorage of diegesis and characters is a way in which readers are introduced or “anchored” into the story by understanding the names of characters and/or locations through the dialogue of the characters rather than through exposition, as typically done in novel writing (36). For example, if a character said, “Hey, Jack! What’s up, bro?”, the reader instantly understands that the secondary character is Jack and is more than likely Character A’s brother (the dialogue following this exchange would continue to reveal whether *bro* is literal or friendly). Similarly, communication of narrative causality is when dialogue “unfold[s] through a series of events, linked together by succession and causality” (Kozloff 38). One of the primary motives of film dialogue is to communicate the answers to how, when, and why to the audience while remaining natural sounding rather than expository; and often, the dialogue serves to further demonstrate the significance of the characters’ actions during a particular scene, such as when a suspenseful moment is further intensified through a character’s words (37-38). Finally, verbal events serve as “the disclosure of a secret of crucial information, information vital to the plot, whose revelation poses some risk or jeopardy” (41). For example, in the film *Chinatown* one of the characters reveal the secret nature of a young girl by declaring, “She’s my daughter *and* my sister!” while the prayer in *It’s a Wonderful Life* reveals the character’s religion without it having been explicitly named (qtd in Kozloff 41).

These described methods of writing dialogue, then, are the primary ways in which I will keep my readers informed and aware of the characters’ actions, personalities, and appearances without using exposition. While I still use traditional narrative techniques (hence the usage of the

second person), the exposition will be kept to a minimum to engage neurodivergent readers. Additionally, minimal exposition may also appeal to a neurotypical audience as many readers in general find lengthy narratives to be either dull or unnecessary.

Scientific Reasoning for the Project's Formatting

As discussed in the previous section which explained the reasoning of my project's novel-screenplay hybrid style, one of the goals of *When the Tide Comes* is to help neurodivergent readers find the process of reading easier, and this therefore includes formatting the project in a unique way that encourages focus and quick reading. Primarily, neurodivergent people do better either finding for themselves key words or phrases that summarize the meaning of the text or by having key words or phrases specifically designed to have attention drawn to them (Moore; Shapiro). With these ideas in mind on how to encourage focus within neurodivergent readers, my project is designed to minimize distractions and increase reading speed through font style, bold-face and italics, and paragraph spacing and indentation.

Logo designer Bogdan Sandu explains that font styles greatly determine how readers process information. From determining whether we're reading a novel or a textbook, a children's book or an instruction manual, an Instagram post or an academic article, fonts indicate the maturity and the subject matter of written text (Sandu). More importantly, however, fonts influence the way people process information based on their size and spacing so selecting the right font is especially important for aiding neurotypical people as they need a font that encourages a feeling of welcome and reduces overwhelm (Sandu). For those with ADHD, studies have demonstrated that the Sans Serif fonts are preferred over the traditional Serif fonts as the latter are designed with "little feet at the end of each letter" (a visual example is the very font of this paper) which are harder on non-neurotypical eyes and create more distraction (Sandu). In

contrast, the modern Sans Serif fonts are clean-cut and straightforward, making them easy on the eyes and quicker to process. However, while all Sans Serif fonts naturally increase reading focus, which specific font increases reading speed varies from person to person and must be left to the personal preference of the reader. Since my project is primarily inspired by my ADHD sister Kyndal, it will be formatted in the Sans Serif font we discovered (after testing a number of fonts) speeds her reading, which is Gill Sans MT. (Visual examples of this font's style are in the next section.)

In addition to font, research has proven that boldface and italics ease the readability of text for neurodivergent individuals. One of the most prominent modern examples of this is the reading form that went viral on TikTok in 2022: Bionic Reading. Designed by Swiss typographic designer Renato Casutt, Bionic Reading is a typographical reading style that encourages faster reading and better comprehension (Casutt). By “revis[ing] texts so that the most concise parts of the words” are in bold, a reader’s eye is guided over the text while the brain center naturally finishes the rest of the word (Casutt). According to the feedback Casutt received on this new reading method, many of those with ADHD and dyslexia reported that, with Bionic formatting, they understood texts the first time they read them, whereas texts without Bionic formatting required countless rereads. Likewise, psychologist Aditya Shukla notes that italics are a great way to encourage focus for neurodivergent readers as italics usually indicate that something is important, hence why textbooks use this technique to remind students to remember specific definitions. Research demonstrates that italics increases fixation time in those with ADHD, and while some have stated this may be a negative effect, my sister Kyndal noticed that the encouragement to be fixated on the words increased her focus (Moore; Shukla). My project, therefore, combines both of these styles to aid its readability by italicizing the narrative (which,

as previously discussed, tends to be the most difficult part of reading for neurodivergent individuals) and putting the names of the speakers in bold to clarify exactly which character is talking, thereby encouraging speed and deterring rereads.

Finally, line and paragraph spacing plays a large role in the readability of a text for neurodivergent people as too much spacing can create distraction whereas too little gives the appearance of a cluttered page and confuses the eye. ATG Publishing, a publishing house dedicated to designing books that are accessible for those with ADHD, discovered through the feedback of neurodivergent readers specific features that ease the readability of texts, specifically regarding the construction of paragraphs. According to ATG publishing, paragraphs should have a full line break between them as this “creates a visual space that helps in distinguishing separate ideas, making the text easier to follow and reducing the overwhelming feeling that large blocks of text can cause” (“ADHD Friendly Publishing Standards”). Likewise, paragraphs should be short to minimize overwhelm as it “reduces visual clutter” and “makes the text appear more inviting and less daunting, which can be crucial for readers with ADHD” and avoid indentations, formatted instead as blocks of text (“ADHD Friendly Publishing Standards”). Additionally, ATG publishing discovered that 1.3 line spacing ensured that neurodivergent readers could absorb the information easier as this size leaves sufficient space between the lines to avoid “blending of lines” without being too spaced apart to encourage distraction, both of which can cause neurodivergent readers to skip lines or lose their spot (“ADHD Friendly Publishing Standards”). It is this style of paragraph spacing—full line breaks, block format, short paragraphs, and 1.3 line spacing—which my project will be formatted in order so it will be more accessible to neurodivergent readers while remaining appealing to neurotypical individuals.

Visual Examples of Project's Formatting

Figure 1.

FOCUS ON April's face as she stares up at who-who . . . Mama? No, that's not Mama. But Mama's face stares down at you in the water—no, you're not in water. You're—you're in bed? But you're shaking from the cold water and you can't breathe and your cheeks are wet. Wait. Just your cheeks are wet, not your clothes. So you weren't in water. Of course not because you're in bed. It must have been a dream, a bad one because now Mama's tucking a strand of hair behind your ear—no, that's not Mama, that's June; and she's telling you to breathe.

Okay, okay, breathe. It hurts your chest and you wince. Something wet trickles down your face again. A tear? Have you been crying? Are you crying?

June: *Shh, it's okay. She brushes her thumb on your cheek. A tear streaks across your skin. You are crying. Like a baby, you must be crying because your cheek's wet again and June swipes her thumb on it again.*

She smiles down at you.

June: *Breathe, April. It's okay.*

Breathe. Are you not breathing? No, you're not because your chest hurts when you do. And you don't want to breathe. You don't want breath. You don't want air. You want Mama. You want Mama to come save you. You want Mama to dive into the water after you. You want—you want—you want to—

Cry. It brews inside you like that unexpected storm and then smacks you broadside just as the waves smacked the lifeboat and sent you spiraling into the ocean. The sobs burn your lungs like the saltwater they are, and you bite your lip to keep them back; but your eyes are poor sand dunes against the waves tumbling against them. Because you know that what you want will never happen. Because you know that you're not actually in an ocean. Because you know that Mama is not actually here.

Because you know that Mama is never actually coming back.

June still swipes the tears from your cheeks with her thumbs. Gosh, if she could scoop them up, she'd probably have buckets of them right now. You visualize a whole fleet of sand buckets lined neatly in a row against your bed, all full to the brim as June hooks your tears like a fishing line and dumps them in the pail nearest her.

June: *Shh, it's okay. It's okay. Just breathe.*

Figure 2.

FOCUS ON David as he looks at Jack. That should've elicited a response. That's why you said it. Something to get Jack interacting with you. But he just sits slouched in his chair and stares at his half-empty plate, hands shoved in his sweatshirt pocket as if he hadn't heard you. What's up with the strange silence tonight? He muttered a "hey" to you when he came down for dinner and barely smiled when you joked about getting home sooner, something you knew should've made him laugh. He's got the deer-in-the-headlights look going on in his eyes.

You glance at Ben. Did you miss something? Something happen today?

Ben shakes his head at you and looks at Jack too. Nope, he's as confused as you. All right. Either Jack's just off in La-La Land or whatever galaxy he gets himself into or something's up. You bet B based on his glum look. Change of tactics then. Little more direct.

David: Hey.

Still just staring at the plate. You lean forward slightly and try to catch his eye, raising your voice a little.

David: Hey.

Jack jumps. He looks from you to Ben to you again as if trying to figure out who spoke. Okay, so we were in a galaxy far, far away. Planet Panic looks like, judging the look on his face. What's up?

David: You're pretty quiet tonight, pal. You okay?

FOCUS ON Jack as he glances from Ben to David. What did David just say to you? Ben's not giving you any hints. He asked if you were okay, right? Which means that you should say you're fine—fine, another f word, another reminder that you're a failure. Maybe that's what David's getting out. You haven't heard what he and Mom and Ben have been saying. They've been cutting up with each other, you think, but their voices have been a muffled noise to you. Did Mom tell him about the failed test? Is David hinting at something?

You gotta say something, man. David stares at you, waiting for a response, and the longer you take, the more he's going to think you're avoiding the question, which will make him think something's wrong. Because if David doesn't know about the failed grade, he'll still think something's wrong so he'll keep asking because David never stops until he gets what he wants, and you'll have to tell him about the failed grade because David will keep prodding you for it—

He's waiting. Speak, idiot!

Jack: What?

Crap! no! That's not the answer! And look, there he goes: David knows something's wrong; you see it in his eyes. No, no, you got to get him to know you're fine—there's another f word, you failure—because maybe he doesn't know yet and maybe Mom will tell him later and maybe then he'll cool off before before he lectures you—

David: I said are you—

Jack: I-I'm fine.

David raises an eyebrow.

David: So why'd you say "what"?

Inspiration from Primary Sources (Novels)

As an avid reader of multiple genres and styles as well as a literature advocate, my project *When the Tide Comes* draws inspiration from a variety of literary works both past and present. My biggest literary influence is none other than the infamous Charles Dickens in that the vast majority of Dickens's novels—*A Christmas Carol*, *Great Expectations*, *Oliver Twist*—addressed the social concerns of his day, and likewise, my project raises awareness to two modern societal issues that I believe go unnoticed, which are the mental health effects experienced by neurodivergent people and domestic abuse survivors. More specifically, however, my project draws inspiration from Dickens's symbolic descriptions in *A Tale of Two Cities*. Throughout this novel, Dickens uses metaphorical language to paint a vivid picture as he often describes physical beings with vocabulary normally prescribed to inanimate objects. A prominent example of this is found in the fifth chapter when the French peasants rush to lap up the wine from the broken casket and Dickens utilizes verbs and adjectives primarily attributed to rats, thereby emphasizing both the desperation and the villainy of the French populace (30-31). During Darnay's first trial, Dickens describes the eager spectators as flies buzzing around a piece of meat and refers to the characters by their titles—Attorney-General, Mr. Solicitor-General, Judge, etc.—rather than their names in order to heighten the tension of the event (73). Additionally, Dickens interweaves many Christian themes and symbols throughout his

descriptions in *A Tale of Two Cities*, with the most notable being his references to the Resurrection and the Life and the subtle mention of Christ's description of the temple as a den of thieves in the final chapter (429). This style of metaphorical language to describe and address societal issues is what I employ throughout my project (indeed, I have a courtroom scene utilizing this writing form in ode to Dickens's courtroom chapters), and I especially interweave Catholic references throughout as my denomination heavily relies on scriptural typography, much like the biblical allusions in *A Tale of Two Cities*.

In lesser yet still significant ways, my project also draws inspiration from William Faulkner's representation of the American South and James Joyce's writing format. In practically all of his works, Faulkner strove to accurately depict the heritage of the American South, specifically that of Mississippi (Parvathi and Harinath). Though all his settings were fictional, Faulkner is noted for his ability to craft his locations so realistically through physical descriptions and dialogue that they nevertheless feel as if they could be real places as his "major concern was to reflect his county in the form of fiction" (Parvathi and Harinath 2). In the same way, I seek to accurately represent the settings of my state North Carolina in my project, specifically my state's blend of southern accents by having the Dawes family speak with a slight southern tilt while the Griffiths dialect is rather straightforward, thereby representing the language of North Carolina's coast. And while James Joyce utilizes the stream of consciousness narrative technique throughout his novel *Ulysses*, my project is primarily inspired by Joyce's hybridity of this novel as he blends playwriting, newspaper headings, and letter writing with the traditional narrative style, much as I interweave screenplay elements with narrative techniques.

In addition to authors of the past, my project is influenced by historical screenwriter Norman Rilley Raine. Having started his career at the age of seventeen in 1912, Raine was

innovative for his time and known for his groundbreaking films *Tugboat Annie* and *The Adventures of Robin Hood* (Freeman). *The Adventures of Robin Hood* produced by Warner Brothers was especially revolutionary in the film industry due to its wide range and new uses of camera angles (Behlmer 37). It is Raine's camera angle directions that I mimic for my project in addition to his style of formatting parentheticals for the characters' dialogue. In screenplay writing, parentheticals are emotional directions (adjectives or adverbs) or physical directions (verbs or verb phrases) that tell the actor how he will say his line of dialogue or what action he performs as he says his lines and are formatted in parentheses before the line of dialogue (Trotter 105). This form of direction is primarily used when "subtext of the speech," or how the actor should say his lines, is unclear (Trotter 105). To illustrate, here is an excerpt from Raine's screenplay *The Adventures of Robin Hood*:

RICHARD (grim smile):

Yes, I'm afraid he suspects. So, we'll give him a head start, then we'll move on.

ESSEX:

His Grace is Norman. Did you see the fear in the landlord's face when he came in?

RICHARD (somberly):

I've seen it in the faces of thousands since we returned. I should never have left England. (179)

As this example from Raine shows, the parentheticals show how Richard speaks. However, it is noted among modern screenwriters that parentheticals should be avoided at all costs with emotional directions only used if the dialogue does not clearly indicate the emotion of the speech and physical directions only used if action "can be described in three or four words and seems to accompany the speech" (Trotter 157). Raine, nevertheless, used parentheticals frequently in *The Adventures of Robin Hood* as the screenplay is littered with both emotional and physical

directions. Whether this is because he thought the emotions within his dialogue were unclear or that the dialogue which reflected a somewhat outdated dialect needed some extra clarity (due to the film reflecting the medieval era of the Robin Hood legend) is uncertain, yet the parentheticals do add an emphasis that clearly reveals the speaker's emotion and actions, regardless of the original intent.

It is a balance between the modern screenwriting rule of thumb on parentheticals and Norman Rilley Raine's abundant usage of them that I implement in two ways in my project *When the Tide Comes*. First, I take the modern approach of limiting the usage of parentheticals and relying on the dialogue itself to convey the characters' emotions. The purpose of this is not only to properly mimic screenwriting dialogue as described in the previous section on incorporating a screenplay style in my novel, but also to give neurodivergent readers the freedom to imagine the characters' speech as they so please, which stimulates their imagination and thereby encourages faster reading as also formerly discussed. Second, I do adopt Raine's idea of incorporating parentheticals slightly more often than a screenwriter as my project is a novel-screenplay hybrid and, as traditional narrative storytelling styles are frequently employed, parentheticals are sometimes needed for the sake of clarity, just as a novelist will often insert adverbs or adjectives in a dialogue tag. I also adapt parentheticals to suit my project's formatting to make it more friendly for neurodivergent readers by dropping the parentheses and simply attaching either the adverb, adjective, or verbal descriptor as a phrase to the character's name following a comma. This allows the original parenthetical purpose to still be applied while avoiding confusion for both neurodivergent and non-neurodivergent readers who may not be familiar with screenwriting concepts. To illustrate my adaptation of this technique, here are two visual examples from the chapters provided in this project:

Figure 1:

You glance at David. He's treading a very thin line.

Ben, warningly: David . . .

But your warning comes too late. Mom explodes, her words spewing like shards of dynamite. You wince at her volume, ears ringing. You've always had sensitive ears, you think, which is why you're more prone to wearing earplugs than the rest of the guys you work with. They rang when your father spoke, and they rattle now.

Molly, yelling: Little world that I keep him sheltered in? I don't shelter him, and I don't keep him separate from the world. You know damn well what I've tried to do! I keep him separate from the issues you boys had to deal with, and you damn sure do the same—

Figure 2.

You snatch up your fork and spear the prongs into a waffle.

Jack, mumbling: Good.

Molly: Oh, syrup!

Mom darts off to the pantry as if the fate of the Republic hangs in the balance and lies in her retrieving the bottle. Meanwhile, the fate of the Republic is just fine with Ben. He eats as if only his appetite hangs in the balance.

Ben, around a bite: I think they taste great without it.

While my thesis certainly takes inspiration from a variety of past authors, there are also many present writers whose works have influenced my project. Lisa Genova's contemporary novel *Still Alice* which tells the story of a woman slowly losing her mind from dementia, for example, is similar in theme to my work not only in genre and vocabulary but also in its desire to raise awareness to mental health to serve as guide for both people experiencing the problem and those who seek to better aid these individuals. *Gilead* by Marilynne Robinson, though of the literary fiction, encourages her audience to slow down and pay attention to the simple things in life particularly by emphasizing the beauty of little things either through poetic descriptions or a complete focus on an ordinary element, such as a bubble: "I saw a bubble float past my window,

fat and wobbly and ripening towards that dragonfly blue they turn just before they burst” (Robinson 9). I not only take Robinson’s approach for describing the beauty of the simple things in life, but I also apply it for describing the trials that the simple things can bring, such as how much of a battle it can be to rise from bed in the morning when enduring depression. Similarly, *My Grandmother Asked Me to Tell You She’s Sorry* by Fredrik Backman also details the often-overlooked struggles of everyday life, but he does it through the simplistic narrative of a seven-year-old girl. Naturally, Backman’s descriptions of everyday trials influence my writing style, yet I also mimic his usage of the present tense and his technique of simplifying heavy topics from a child’s perception as I too write in the perspective of a first grader. Indeed, simple perspectives play a large role in my project as I also write from the point of view of a dog, similar to Kate DiCamillo describing a dog’s emotions in her middle grade novel *The Miraculous Journey of Edward Tulane*. Like Backman, DiCamillo strategically discusses weighty themes in her work—including domestic abuse—yet subtly describes their significance when describing the dog’s actions and potential thoughts. This is the approach I also take in my project when writing in the dog’s point of view as I wish for my audience to understand the significance of specific events while also realistically portraying a dog’s somewhat simple behavior. Sometimes, however, the weighty themes of my project must be clearly addressed, much like Patrick Ness’s *A Monster Calls*. Ness’s novel describes the grief and depression of a young boy watching his mother slowly die from cancer, and one of the families in my project also loses a mother to cancer. I therefore not only draw inspiration from Ness’s descriptions of grief, but I also pay tribute to his work in my project as one of the neurodivergent characters reads Ness’s book due to its ADHD friendly layout and overcomes her grief through the story. Lastly, my project draws inspiration from *The Night Circus* by Erin Morgenstern for, though fantasy, parts of the novel are written

from the second person point of view and in the present tense. I especially enjoy the way Morgenstern's writing style evokes the reader to both think and be like a character in the novel, which is a feeling I strive to replicate in my project.

Mental Health Research

Due to the overarching theme of my project, I have performed extensive research on the conditions of ADHD, PTSD, and C-PTSD. This has included source materials from notable doctors and psychiatrists as well as firsthand accounts from trauma survivors and ADHD individuals. The aim of my project is for the characters to realistically portray and endure the actions, experiences, and thought-processes of these people as naturally as an author would depict a "normally" functioning character; and therefore, I have dedicated much of my time to learning how to subtly integrate these characteristics while understanding the differences between the terms and how to avoid stereotypes. More specifically, I have focused on the myths and common misconceptions on these mental health conditions portrayed by the media so as to make individuals experiencing these circumstances feel understood and properly represented. As an example, anxiety and panic attacks are commonly experienced by those diagnosed with ADHD, PTSD, and C-PTSD, yet these two terms, though similar, are not interchangeable and are not endured the same way with each different type. Psychologist Dr. Julie Smith, for example, explains in great detail the difference between anxiety and panic attacks, noting how that the confusion has arisen due to the term anxiety attack being tossed around on social media frequently these days though it is a nonclinical term (Smith). While definitely a real issue, anxiety attacks nevertheless have not been medically defined and therefore are often either confused with panic attacks, thereby misrepresenting panic attacks, or are completely misunderstood so that no one understands how to recognize their true symptoms (Smith).

Understanding the differences between the two, then, is key for my goal to accurately represent these conditions.

Similarly, PTSD and C-PTSD are often used interchangeably, or the latter is completely unrecognized due to PTSD being such a prominent mental disorder. Dr. Scott Giacomucci, Founder of the Phoenix Center for Experiential Trauma Therapy in Media, Pennsylvania, details in great length in a short documentary not only the psychiatric history of these two terms, but also the major variances and similarities between them to show why they are often confused and how to recognize the differences. PTSD, for example, is recognized as a mental disorder caused by “general trauma” which are often one-time physical events that negatively affect the brain, the most prominent naturally being wartime experiences and physical abuse (Giacomucci). On the other hand, C-PTSD is aroused by “complex trauma,” which is when an individual experiences “recurring and repeating experiences of trauma usually of a similar nature and often times within the context of a relationship, many times in childhood,” and takes the form of neglect, abuse, abandonment, and so on (Giacomucci). Giacomucci also explains how trauma victims can overcome their trauma and provides real-life examples on how to mediate flashbacks, and this knowledge is just as important for my project as the descriptions of the disorders themselves as I plan on depicting my characters gradually growing and conquering their trauma so as to provide hope for other victims.

Just as complex trauma is often misunderstood, ADHD is often misrepresented by the media with film and television characters portrayed as reckless and as comic relief. In reality, those with ADHD are often contemplative and imaginative, and their mentality is not an exciting and “fun” place like most forms of media depict but rather it can be somberly solitary as they experience anxiety, depression, loneliness, and the feeling of being an outcast as they find it hard

to process the world that is naturally designed for neurotypical people. Part of my project's purpose, then, is to break these stereotypes and show the lesser known yet significant trials of ADHD to accurately represent neurodivergent individuals and make them feel seen while also providing them with fictional examples on how to live in a neurotypical world. To accomplish this, I have relied on both my experiences and interviews with my sister Kyndal as well as firsthand accounts from ADHD YouTubers such as Conor DeWolfe and Hayley Honeyman who seek to raise awareness to the true experiences of neurotypical individuals.

Finally, I have also researched the complications pregnant women face when simultaneously diagnosed with breast cancer. Though not a primary plot point within the sample chapters provided in this project, the novel itself revolves around one family grieving the loss of their wife and mother who battled breast cancer while pregnant. That said, what I have discovered is that breast cancer does not affect the baby whatsoever, just the mother (National Cancer Institute). What can affect the unborn child is which form of treatment the mother plans to have, and therefore cancer treatment of any kind (whether that be surgery, radiation, or chemotherapy) is not recommended until the mother reaches her second trimester, wherein the baby has developed enough to not be affected by outside treatment upon the mother (National Cancer Institute). However, depending upon the severity of the tumor and the mother's own personal health choices, common cancer treatments such as radiation and chemotherapy may be postponed until the baby's birth, though this naturally may also affect the mother's overall health. This is the approach—waiting until the baby's birth—that the character within my story takes and which ultimately leads to her passing away upon giving birth to the baby, and while again this is a not subject discussed within the sample chapters below, it does result in specific characters' guilt and internal conflicts for their development throughout the novel as a whole.

Conclusion

As this paper has demonstrated, my thesis *When the Tide Comes* addresses many themes of the past and the present, yet all of these ideas are centered around mental health and advocating for the individuals experiencing certain conditions, specifically ADHD, C-PTSD, and PTSD. Through patterning Henry James's approach to psychological realism and incorporating the stream of consciousness narrative technique, I will not only mimic the realistic thought processes of humans, but I will also accurately represent the often chaotic and lonely mental traps that neurodivergent and trauma victims experience. Likewise, my usage of the second person and the present tense further simulates the feeling of living in a quasi-reality these individuals tend to endure while simultaneously creating a personal voice that encourages readers to sympathize more with the characters as they both observe the characters and perceive themselves as the characters as well. Through the integration of screenplay styles and taking into consideration the reading challenges for neurodivergent individuals, the project is formatted in a way that stimulates focus and speed for non-neurotypical readers through camera directions, an emphasis on dialogue rather than exposition, and font styles and paragraph spacing while remaining appealing to neurotypical readers through both its format and its incorporation of the traditional narrative style. Additionally, primary literary sources from both the past and the present inspire both the exposition and the dialogue of my project, and the research gathered from primary sources regarding the various mental health disorders addressed in my work provides me with the knowledge on how to accurately represent them and provide these people with a message of hope. While neurodivergent individuals and trauma survivors often feel lost and alone, it is my hope that this project may serve to show them that perhaps they may be lost with others, and if they are with others, then they are indeed not alone but are instead on a

journey of discovering healing and embracing how wonderful it is to be abnormal in a too normal world.

Creative Manuscript

Working Title: *When the Tide Comes*

Sample chapters 1-9

One

Meet Your Family

Chapter Summary: In the opening chapter, the reader is introduced to the two families and the characters within those families whom the reader will “roleplay,” if you will, throughout the novel. The first family is the Griffiths, consisting of the mother Molly, her two adult sons David and Ben, and her teenage son Jack. Through family interactions, dialogue, and plot devices, the reader becomes aware that Molly divorced years back and lives with her sons for support. The reader learns that David is a construction equipment salesman, Ben is a house carpenter, Molly is a stay-at-home mom, and Jack will enter high school after summer break ends in a few weeks. Jack’s ADHD and Molly’s emotional trauma are suggested. It is also hinted that David, though the son, is the head of the household.

The second family is the Dawes consisting of the father Mac, his two young-adult daughters June and May, his teenage daughter April, and his seven-year-old daughter Summer. Like with the Griffiths, family interactions, dialogue, and plot devices are used to show the reader their various ages, occupations/hobbies, and personalities. Brief moments of grief are highlighted as the reader gradually learns of their mother’s death from cancer. The reader is also made aware that Mac owns a house-building company and will later be understood to be the one whom Ben works for.

Two

The Return of It

SCENE OPENS in the Griffith kitchen in the evening. The drawn curtain of the kitchen-sink window shows the dark sky so that the yellow kitchen lights reflect all the brighter off the linoleum floor. The microwave clock reads 9:15. A half-eaten cake rests on the table surrounded by crumb-scattered plates and a few coffee mugs. Molly, David, and Ben sit at the table, and though the dining setting is sweet, the mood of the diners themselves is soured with tension. Molly grips a coffee mug, clicking her nails against the pewter, and stares hotly at the cake plate. David sits back in his seat frowning at her, fingers drumming the tabletop. Ben rests his elbows on the table and rubs his eyes, as if tired of the argument.

David: I don't understand why you're so set against it.

FOCUS ON Molly as she stops clicking the mug and clutches it tighter.

Heat pumps through your hands, and it's not from the coffee cup that grew cold long ago. David's finger-drumming is like he's tapping the buttons of a thermostat inside you and jacking up the heat. You hate when he does that, hate when he uses this tone with you, hate when he bites his lower lip like that, all indicators that the man is fed up with the woman and wants her to snap back to reality.

As if you're not in reality. As if you're not thinking clearly. As if you haven't sat here for God knows how long and explained to him that Jack's ADHD and dyslexia are what isolated him in grade school, made him mocked and humiliated and bullied so he felt as if he were the incompetent problem rather than the problem being the incompetent instructors and system.

And that's who David wants to put Jack back with. The lying, incompetent system that will ensnare your son yet again in a net of deception. You swallow the heat that now rises in your throat, but you can't stop the words from scraping against your tongue when you speak.

Molly: Because he's not ready yet. That's what I've been trying to tell you.

David scoffs.

David: Not ready yet? When will he be then, Mom? Two months? A year? Do you know?

No, you don't know. You never have known how you're doing with Jack academically. You've been faking it the whole time, relying on Google and Sylvan Learning Centers and videos like from Khan Academy because surely you could teach Jack how to spell, write, and read. "Fake it 'till you make it" was the motto you practically tattooed on your forehead the past four years. Well, you faked it all right. But did you make it? Did you make it, Molly?

That's the answer David's demanding to have. You both know the answer; he wants to hear you say it. He rubs your nose in your failure just like he rubbed Lucy's nose in her own urine back when she was a puppy and wouldn't stop peeing in the house, the training you hadn't had the will to enforce. And like Lucy, you burn with humiliation.

You massage your forehead, your hand hopefully concealing the salty heat forming behind your eyes.

Molly: Just—just stop it. Stop it, all right?

FOCUS ON Ben. You glance at David, communicating with him solely through your eyes as you two have always been able to do, a survival skill you learned as children. Right now, though, you're not communicating for the survival of your lives but rather the survival of this conversation.

Let's ease up, man.

You've been at this with Mom for about fifteen minutes now, judging by the microwave clock. As soon as Jack went upstairs, you glanced at David who then nodded at you, signaling that was the time to bring up the school conversation with Mom. For a year now, you both have hinted at to full on having hour long conversations with her on Jack needing to finish his education. She pulled him out of public school when he was twelve, and while you both agree that it had been the better decision, both of you realize that Mom's created this unrealistic dreamscape for herself. She's holding on to Jack. Because she's scared. It's obvious.

So changing tactics will be better. Switch from David's more abrupt, firm resolve of shaking Mom awake to slowly rousing her. Remind her of how this will benefit Jack and keep reminding her of that to remove the sleeping mask of fear that only allows slivers of Jack's former poor experiences to slip through its tight threads.

You fold your hands and rest them on the table, tilting your head to try to meet her eyes that she hides behind her hand.

Ben: Mom, we've all known since you started homeschooling him that Jack's got to go back for high school.

David: You said yourself you can't teach him.

You wince. That's not what you needed. Nor Mom. Sure enough, Mom lowers her hand and glances up at him through hooded eyes, her voice rising with every sentence.

Molly: I said I wasn't confident. I didn't say "I can't." Don't you twist my words, David!

David: Okay, fine. Either way, that leaves Jack without a teacher, right? Whether you can't or won't do it, someone else has to do it.

Molly: No one understands him but us! He's only comfortable around people he knows.

You quickly jump back in before David can rebut.

Ben: That's the point, Mom.

Mom tears her eyes from David and stares at you as if you've declared you joined Hitler's side. She starts to speak then shakes her head and rests her forehead against her hand, flabbergasted.

David sits back again and runs an annoyed hand over his mouth. You can tell he's fed up with Mom's emotional-driven responses and struggles to keep a blunt statement or snarky comment at bay. David's always been the straight-forward, no emotion, cut-through-the-crap-type guy. Granted, it's what pulled y'all through a lot of tough crap . . . and granted, gotten y'all in a lot of crap with Mom.

You share another glance with him.

Give me a sec with her, man.

He half-way shrugs. Fine. Give it a shot.

You shift in your seat, getting Mom's eye contact again. Again, do this slowly. Make her aware of Jack's need for social interactions.

Ben: Remember the other day when I took Jack with me to pick up some planks for the new house I'm working on? I had him pay for it. He couldn't even look the cashier in the eye and dropped the change all over the place. Then he forgot the receipt and dropped it at least three times before handing it to me.

Mom bites her finger, quickly averting her gaze to her coffee mug. You've struck a chord.

Molly, quietly: He gets nervous. He's-he's not good working with strangers.

David: Yeah, exactly. But he's no different from anyone else—

Any passivity Mom had immediately flees. Great. She straightens, whipping her head at David.

Molly: Yes, he is—

David, voice hardening: So like everyone else, he can work on getting over it.

Molly, voice rising in volume: “Get over it?” You think he's got this phobia or something? Like I've made up his condition, and we can just snap our fingers—

You sigh and tug on your ball cap to scratch your forehead which starts to ache.

Ben: Mom, no, that's not what he—

David raises a hand as if in surrender.

David: Okay, okay, bad word choice. All right? Bad word choice.

Mom glowers at him before returning her gaze to the table as if she could drill holes through the wood. David leans on the table towards her, taking a sharp inhale, evidently trying to prevent himself from reacting further to Mom's emotionally-charged responses.

David: Look, we all agree that Jack has to be able to function in the real world. Without us.

Mom glares up at him.

Molly: What do you mean the “real world?”

David: I mean not this little world you keep him sheltered in.

You glance at David. He's treading a very thin line.

Ben, warningly: David . . .

But your warning comes too late. Mom explodes, her words spewing like shards of dynamite. You wince at her volume, ears ringing. You've always had sensitive ears, you think, which is why you're more prone to wearing earplugs than the rest of the guys you work with. They rang when your father spoke, and they rattle now.

Molly, yelling: Little world that I keep him sheltered in? I don't shelter him, and I don't keep him separate from the world. You know damn well what I've tried to do! I keep him separate from the issues you boys had to deal with, and you damn sure do the same—

David balls his hands into fists, and you see his knuckles whiten.

David: I'm not talking about the old man, Mom.

Mom starts to retort, but you quickly touch her hand, drawing her gaze to you.

Ben: Mom, let's stay on track here. David. *You glance between them both.* Let's all stay focused. Please.

David rubs his upper lip with his thumb and stares at the crumbs on the cake plate as if he could disintegrate them with his gaze. Mom makes some kind of noise between a shaky sigh and a short chuckle and likewise rubs trembling fingers over her lips. Maybe that's where David got it from, you randomly think. No surrender. But a flag of truce.

A silent pause finally settles in the room. You inhale deeply, at last able to still the rattling drums in your ears, and it feels as if the kitchen cabinets themselves exhale along with you. David glances up at the ceiling, still rubbing his upper lip. You hope he's either counting to ten or praying for strength to count to a hundred. Mom now rests her forehead in her hand, fingers massaging her temples.

The wall clock behind you ticks away the seconds. A steady hum fills the room as the AC unit turns on. You hear Lucy patter up the staircase.

David clears his throat and shifts in his chair, calm again. He folds his hands on the table, pushing away an empty cake plate. He speaks slowly as if choosing his words.

David: Okay, Mom. Put aside Jack's personal issues for just a moment. Just think about his education. What could you possibly do? What's the point of this whole college fund we've been working to save for Jack if he can't even get to high school? He's got to complete his education, right? So, who's going to do it?

FOCUS ON Molly as she inhales sharply. You're cornered, that's what you are, cornered between these two rocks that refuse to move no matter how hard you shove. Neither of them will budge in the slightest to see your opinion. Neither of them will even hear your opinion. You shake your head as you struggle to keep yourself from shouting again, which seems to be the only way to get them to hear you.

Molly: I'm not saying he shouldn't go to school—I'm just saying there could be another way.

David: What way?

There it is again. Rubbing your nose in the urine. You jump in your chair from the sheer strength of David's words slapping your face. Hot tears prick your eyes at the pain. You indicate your surrender fiercely with your hands, palms upward.

Molly: I don't know! I just—I don't know, David, okay? I don't know. *You shake your head and once again drop it in your hands, striving to hide your emotions from your sons. You've already shown too much. But it's hard, and the emotions are building, mounting like a rumbling volcano inside your chest. Why do they make you admit your faults? You're sorry. Don't they know that by now? You're sorry you're not smart enough. You're sorry that you've never been smart enough.*

FOCUS ON David as he taps his thumbs together. Mom's obviously taking all this as a personal attack. That's the only explanation for her roller-coaster emotions. Well, not the only. But the second explanation kindles a fire in your blood, and you need to stay as cool-headed as possible right now. Someone has to. As always. And it's gotta be you. As always. So you wait for Mom to gather her wits. As always.

Mom takes a deep breath and puts her folded hands under her chin, staring at the kitchen clock behind Ben rather than at either of you.

Molly, quietly: Why not online? There are so many schools like that these days. He'd be with me, I could help him—

No. This is where you gotta cut in again. Sorry, Mom.

David: That's the problem, Mom. He'd be here with you.

Mom swallows and finally looks at you. This time, though, her eyes aren't scorching you; rather, they're cooling you because she looks frightenedly confused, like how you'd imagine a newborn would look the first time it opened its eyes and didn't see its mother. And she's given you this frightened, newborn look many times before. And each time, it shuts you up.

Molly: What are you saying?

You glance at Ben. There's this silent language you've created together as kids that you still use. Don't know how it evolved, but things kind of fall in place like that when you're in survival mode. Which is kind of what you're in now. Surviving this conversation.

Ben glances back at you and answers: Harsh but glad you said that.

It had to be said.

Yeah, but glad I'm not the one who had to say it.

Who's gonna say this now?

Probably me since you've been the bad guy so far.

No shit, Sherlock. Take it away.

Ben licks his lips, as if figuring out how to put it the right way, as he usually does. You may not always agree with his softer approach, but you have always appreciated his way of finding the right words in certain moments. You scratch your neck. With certain emotional people.

Ben: You've helped Jack a lot, Mom. A whole lot. His reading comprehension, his writing—heck, you got him off the medication that everyone else told you he needed, right?

Mom bites her finger again, looking at Ben with teary eyes. She's listening. Good.

Ben leans forward slightly as if driving his point home.

Ben: All of it has been you. He wouldn't be where he is without you. *He pauses.* But he's gotten used to that help.

Mom stays silent.

Ben glances at you. Right? Good?

You glance back. Right and good. My turn.

David, quietly: He's used to you holding his hand. He won't push himself if you're there. And she also won't let him but you won't bring that up now.

Mom turns a hot gaze to you, her voice rumbling like a warming volcano.

Molly: Jack was pushed around his whole time in school.

You close your eyes and sigh. Thought you were making headway.

David: Mom, come on now. You know what we're saying—

Molly: And look where that got him. He stopped speaking, David, he stopped freaking speaking because people hurt him, literally pushed him. Do you remember that?

Her hot gaze now burns as lava starts to spit from the volcano. Great. You scratch your forehead. Here we go circling back around rather than going straight.

David: 'Course I remember that—

Molly: I won't let it happen again.

Ben reaches for her hand.

Ben: Mom, I know why you're concerned. But listen, he's sixteen years old and struggles with social skills. Now what—

The volcano erupts. She shouts again, waving her hands hysterically as she sprays hot lava over you both.

Molly: That's exactly my point! He struggles with people, and you two want to throw him out there and let him get run over—

You ball your hands into a fist to keep from slamming the table. They've been at this far too long, and they're not getting anywhere. Still just running in circles. And you're sick of getting singed.

David, voice raised: Mom—

Ben raises his hand, cutting both you and Mom off.

Ben, raising his voice to finish his previous sentence: What are you going to do when he's older? When he gets to college? When he no longer has you or us? *He exhales, calming himself and lowering his voice to a regular volume. He looks hard at Mom, trying to get her to understand. Or*

can we possibly go ahead and get this fixed now? While he's still with us? The people who truly understand him, like you said.

Mom swallows, the fire in her eyes dying as she stares at Ben. He's right. She knows it. But she's too terrified to concede. She covers her trembling lips with a trembling hand again.

Ben sighs a little and glances at you. Didn't mean to yell. Sorry about that.

You raise your eyebrows. Sorry for what again? You're damn straight. Seems like you're the only one she'll listen to right now.

You think Ben smirks a little.

CUT TO the threshold of the kitchen. **FOCUS ON** Jack who crouches in the corner behind the wall, secluded from the sight of those in the kitchen but who can clearly see all three. Lucy sits in his lap, licking his face, and he clutches her.

Your nails dig into Lucy's beagle hair. Her doggy drool sticks to your cheeks, and you snuggle your face into her fur with the excuse of drying it, but really, Lucy gives you something to hold, gives you something to grip when you feel like you're losing your grip.

Because you can't stop shaking. Are you shaking from anger or fear? Probably both. Angry that this is happening. Fearful It will happen.

It had been a nice evening too. Ben and David had shot some hoops with you, something that is rare since they both work all the time, and the three of you hanging together are moments few and far between; even just chilling with David specifically is a rarity. You all had cut it up over dinner and made Mom roll her eyes and say her typical Mom thing—"Really, boys?"—particularly David because his jokes were on fire tonight. You went upstairs to scrub the North Carolinian humidity off you and meant to come back and fool around some more in the living room with your brothers only to have Lucy greet you at the door, head cocked and ears perked up as if saying, "You hear that?"

Angry voices. That's what you'd heard. Angry voices saying your name over and over. Subtly, though, like they wanted to keep it a secret. Like they didn't want you to hear.

But you were going to hear.

You crept down the steps with Lucy slinking beside you and made your position behind the wall of the hall that jutted out into the kitchen doorway. It was the perfect spot. No lights on in the living room save the faint glow coming from the porch lights since the blinds were still open and everyone apparently

forgot to turn on any lights due to whatever it was they were arguing about. Ben's back was to you and you were in David's blind spot. The only person who faced you was Mom, but Ben's back practically shielded her from you. She seemed so distracted by the conversation anyway to notice you, especially if you kept still.

And how could you not keep still when your limbs are seizing up?

You grip Lucy tighter and absently hope your nails aren't biting her skin. The whole evening had been a setup. You see that now. Hanging with you, goofing off with you, acting as if everything was hunky dory only to plot about handing you back over to the Empire soon as you were gone. Admiral Ackbar practically screams in your ear, "It's a trap!"

Because they're talking about putting you back in school. Where It happened. It, that big, dark, devouring Nexu of a monster that's always hungry, always thirsty, and always dripping with the blood of its victims. You practically feel Its coarse hide brush against your shoulder now, and a shiver runs down your spine. Mom says something about you not talking anymore in school. Yeah, that's what happens when you're confronted with It, when you stand in the presence of the syringe monster injecting his venom into you. You get so scared that It steals your voice. And right now, you hear It chuckling behind you. It's already ready and waiting for you, and It can't wait.

No. Don't be a stupid kid, Jack. You bury your face in Lucy's shoulder and pull your knees to your chest, pushing you and Lucy into a tight ball. You're cold. You're cold because you can feel the water dunked on you again. No, It's not here, you maniac. It's not in your house. But you heard the old sing-song chant as the water drip, drip, drips from your hair.

Jack and Jill went up the hill—No, It's not in your house—To fetch a pail of water—No! It's not in your house, It's not in your house . . .

Lucy nudges your neck and then sits back, cocking her head a little as if saying, "What's wrong with you, buddy?"

You pull her back into you, breathing in her doggy fur that still holds the smell of the summer sun that can be hard to wash off her. You put your forehead against her head, speaking your telepathic secret language that only you two understand, like C-3PO and R2-D2.

It's okay, Lucy. Mom'll fix this. It won't happen.

Lucy wriggles her head against yours. Oh, I know that. She always does. She plops her head on your shoulder and snuggles her nose in your neck. Chill, buddy. Mom's gonna fix this.

Yeah, chill; that's right. Mom always fixes it. You're not going back to prison. You're not going back to its clutches. Mom won't let you.

CUT BACK TO *the trio at the kitchen table and FOCUS ON David.*

You waited a few moments for Ben's point to sink in. Now to bring it back to why high school is the best option.

David, quietly: He needs to learn how to function outside this home, which is why—

The volcano threatens to rumble again. Mom stares at the tabletop, the heat from her eyes practically scorching the wood.

Molly: He *can* function outside this home. He does. You act like I keep him locked in the house!

Ben sighs and shakes his head.

Ben: That's not what he means, Mom.

You feel your own temper start to rise.

David, frustrated: How to interact with people, Mom, how to be somewhat “normal” outside this house.

FOCUS ON Molly *as she gapes at David. Normal outside this house . . . How can he say that? Why does he act as if Jack suffers from a severe mental illness? How can he act as if all your research for Jack, all the time you spent with him, all the effort you have poured into him to help him cope, help him learn, help him live what David calls “normal” life have been in vain, have failed?*

Because they have. That's what he's saying, Molly.

A chuckle. A low, sardonic chuckle. You glance between your sons. They stare at you. No, of course it didn't come from either of them. Neither of them sounds like that.

The sardonic chuckle again. Behind you. Over your right shoulder. You can feel the heat of the liquor-tainted breath on your ear. And as it's always done, the breath makes your shoulders shake.

David raises an eyebrow. You catch a glimpse of Ben furrowing his brow and asking, “Mom?” but you ignore him. Oh, god, you've shown it, you've shown your weakness. No. You can't display this weakness in front of them. Not when you need to be strong at this moment. Don't let on to your fear.

So you release your anger instead. It's a good mask. Heat flares throughout your cheeks.

Molly: He can function outside this home! Who the hell do you think he is? Who I am?

FOCUS ON David as he drums his fingers on the table, biting his lower lip. Can she not converse about this issue without yelling? Can she not take the time to pause and think?

You look at Ben. Ben pushes back his ball cap and fiercely scratches his scalp then yanks it back down on his head. Typical sign of irritation in Ben. He's starting to lose it too.

He looks back at you: Let's keep it together.

All right, he's still clear headed. You nod in response then lean across the table towards Mom again. Let's try another live-example approach.

David: Okay, think about this for a minute. Where does he go outside this house? Grocery stores. The library. And always with one of us, right? Mainly you.

Mom swallows. Okay, she's listening again.

David: He doesn't interact with anyone else. He doesn't run in Ben's and my circles, he doesn't have a group of friends. He never has.

She shifts in her seat uneasily.

Molly, weakly: What about the learning centers?

You can't help scoffing at the weak comeback.

David: The learning centers? Really? What, where he hung out with random kids his age for like ten minutes under the guidance of a supervisor?

FOCUS ON Molly as she grips the sides of her head. You're to blame, you're to blame, you're to blame. David suggests that over and over. The liquor-tainted breath gets hotter on your ear, and now you actually feel that heavy hand patting your shoulder, and the liquor-tainted breath whispers hotly in your ear, "What did I tell you?" So you shout to both David and the man behind you.

Molly: It's not like I haven't tried!

Ben touches your hand.

Ben: Mom. No one's blaming you.

Why is he foggy? Gosh, you're letting tears come, Molly. You fiercely swipe at them. The hand on your shoulder approves. "Good, good. No crying, Molly. No crying."

David: You've done your best, Mom. And you've done a damn good job.

FOCUS ON David as he stares at Molly. Tears prick her eyes and her jaw trembles as if she's trying to speak, but then she quickly covers her mouth and closes her eyes. She hasn't heard that, has she? Not often enough, anyway. She's heard plenty of statements about her with the word damn but they weren't describing a job well done. You probably should've said that sooner, jackass.

Her tears douse her volcanic eruption and cool the scorched spots on you too. You move your hands closer to hers. Not where they touch, but close enough for her to know that you're there.

David: You've done all you can do. And that's the point. Jack needs something that will push him outside his comfort zone. With you or one of us around, he can't push himself. He doesn't have to. What's the point? He has us to fall back on. But what will he do when you're not there, like in college, right? Where does he fall then?

Mom squeezes both hands on her mug and leans on the table, her fists bumping against yours. She releases a trembling exhale, her head bowed.

Molly, shakily: What do you have in mind?

That's the side of Mom you know and like best coming around. When she loses it, she's about as crazy as a tropical storm, but when she's calm, she's about as steady as a lighthouse beacon. She's had to be.

You lightly brush her knuckles with your fingers.

David: We found a small private school. K-12. The environment will be completely different from a public high school. More welcoming, more understanding of Jack.

Molly: Can we afford that? A private school?

David: We've already crunched the numbers. May have to cut back on savings for the college fund, but we can make it work.

Mom nods, staring at the tabletop and gripping her mug.

Molly: Do they have IEPs?

FOCUS ON Ben as he glances at David. David's looking for backup now.

Ben: No. You clear your throat and shift in your chair, hoping that won't deter her and your explanation will be good enough. But the classrooms are smaller, probably around fifteen students a class. Elizabeth County Academy. It'll be more personal, more one-on-one with teachers for Jack.

Mom nods again and shakily raises her mug to her lips.

Molly, quietly: Okay.

David: Yeah, it's real nice, Mom. We've already scoped it out.

Mom carefully sets her mug down and nods yet again. David brushes her knuckles with his fingers, and you also reach out and touch her hand. Physical touch has always been a way to speak to Mom somehow. Perhaps you're overthinking it, but you think it's because it was withheld from her so much throughout her life that she needs the assurance that someone is there listening to her, hearing her.

David: Would like to take you there sometime this week so you can see it yourself. Think you'd really like it.

Mom swallows and keeps her gaze on whatever's bound to be cold brew by now is left in her mug. She sets one hand free from the cup though and grabs yours, squeezing it. She's trembling. You squeeze it back. It's all right, Mom. It's all right.

Molly, quietly: Okay.

Ben: It's real convenient too. On the same street with the shopping center. Just about three miles down.

David smiles slightly.

David: So you can do the school run on the grocery run.

You smile a little too.

Ben: Yeah.

Mom shakily brushes a loose strand of hair from her forehead.

Molly: Um—her voice cracks so she clears it—Is there a placement test he'll have to take first?

You squeeze her hand again. All right. Good job, Mom. Now we're making some headway.

CUT TO Jack crouched behind the wall with Lucy.

"What do you have in mind ... Okay ... Okay ..."

She's giving in. No, she can't. Sure, she hasn't agreed yet but the fact that she's asking them shows she's backing down a little.

And how could she not? Neither of them have listened to her the whole time even though she's the only one making sense. They got her cornered. She's been cornered the whole time. Big Ben has sat in front of her, blocking her completely like he's Center position standing guard at the post and refusing to let any

basketballs get through the rim, effectively swatting all Mom's counter attacks and keeping her from making a slam dunk.

And there's David sitting at the head of the table as usual, supposedly so he can fully see the front door. His peripheral vision in his left eye is bad because an elbow jammed it in a basketball tournament in high school. Keeping an eye on the door is just one of his many quirky habits. Normally, it doesn't bother you because it's just a part of your everyday life, as natural as putting on toothpaste before brushing, or putting on socks before the Converse's, or putting on the butter before the jam. Now, it infuriates you. He sits at the end of the table like the head of the household, like the boss, like the king, like Emperor Palpatine sitting on his throne forcing Vader and Luke to do his ultimate bidding. Mom's no match for such a Sith.

She needs help. She needs backup. She needs someone to get on the court with her and think of a new play that will weaken the offense and get the ball in the hoop.

Lucy straightens and shakes her head, flapping her ears. Okay. She wriggles out of your lap.

No, Lucy! You weren't speaking your secret language with her, you were just thinking. You snatch at her collar, trying to tug her back into the shadows with you, but she's too quick and patters into the kitchen.

Molly: *Is there a placement test he'll have to take first?*

Lucy sneezes.

And everyone looks up.

They all see you. Mom looks mortified like she knows you've heard too much and wished you hadn't. Ben looks like he's wincing, almost as if your appearance is like stepping on a thumbtack. And David looks annoyed like you are the stupid thumbtack who's heard too much and needs to be picked up and put in your proper place before you hurt someone.

They all know you've heard everything. You got no choice now. You got to stand up for yourself. You got to stand up before it comes out of the shadows and rips to you shreds with its Nexu claws.

So, you stand up. Step into the kitchen. Feel the slick linoleum on your cold feet. And you put forth the new play Mom was missing.

Jack: *I'm not going.*

FOCUS ON *David who stares at Jack.*

Oh hell. Right when you have finally gotten Mom's fire under control, Jack comes in and throws fuel on the dying flames. You already feel her forest fire crackling again as she takes in Jack standing there, her eyes wide as if she wished he hadn't heard anything. Frankly, you wish he hadn't either. The plan had been to tell Mom what they were going to do and get her calm enough to tell Jack herself he was getting his butt back in school. That would be the only way to get this whole thing done smoothly. That obviously went South. Now you gotta bring it North again before Jack blows it straight off the coastline.

He's talking again.

Jack: I'm not going back to school.

The kid's practically trembling. Cheeks flushed. Eyes glinting. Great. These two can't be together. Not now. Both are too emotional at the moment, running on irrational fear instead of logic, and Jack's emotions are only going to worsen Mom's panic and her resolve to hold him back. She starts to sit back a little, like she's going to go to him. Uh-uh, don't think so.

Molly: Honey—

You lean forward and stare directly into Jack's eyes. Get him focused on you and snapped out of his panic, and perhaps it won't be too bad.

David: 'Kay, this isn't a conversation you need to be part of, pal.

Mom stops and glares at you. All former cool-headedness gone.

Molly, sharply: David.

You keep your attention on Jack. Keep your voice steady but firm.

David: Just get back upstairs. We'll explain later—

Jack takes two steps closer, and you notice his jaw chatters as if he's cold. The panic just keeps mounting. When he talks, you think his voice cracks more from emotion rather than from that teenage phase he's in.

Jack: What do you mean I can't be a part of it? It's me you're talking about.

Come on, Jack, get out of here. Your tone hardens.

David: Get back upstairs, Jack.

Molly: David, stop it.

Ben: Jack, hold on a minute—

Jack, voice rising in volume: You're talking about me like I'm not here, like I don't have an opinion.

Molly: Honey, you do. If you would just—

You feel your teeth grit.

David: Jack, get back upstairs.

Ben glances at you, telling you to ease up on Jack. That's where you two have always disagreed. Ben takes the softer, beat-about-the-bush route, but with Jack, it's gotta be direct. Especially now if they're going to wake him up to reality. Sorry, Ben, but things have been too soft for him for too long.

Ben to Jack: You're not understanding. *He puts a hand on the chair beside him as if offering it to Jack.* Just calm down and sit with us—

Jack either ignores him or is completely oblivious of Ben; you can't tell which. But you can tell that his whole body trembles now, and his chest rises and falls too fast. He's a rumbling volcano about to erupt panicked lava on Mom. Because his beef is with you. Obviously. Which is why you see the anger in that panicked face as he shouts directly at you.

Jack: I'm not some stupid kid who can't think for himself!

Ben winces.

Ben: Jack, stop yelling.

Lucy barks.

Mom extends her hand.

Molly: Honey, please, listen to me—

Your fist clenches. Her tone's so pacifying. Enough with the damn coddling.

David: Really, 'cause you sure are acting like a stupid kid—

Molly: Stop it, David—

Lucy barks again. Ben winces, tugs at one of his ears.

David: So you either sit here and talk this over with us like an adult or get your ass back upstairs.

Ben sighs and tugs on his ballcap.

Ben: David, come on—

Molly: Don't talk to him like that!

Jack: You can't make me go!

Ben: Jack, come on, just list—

You can't help the sardonic chuckle as Jack glares at you, fists balled.

David: Don't think I won't drag your ass up there if I have to.

Mom turns back to Jack.

Molly: We're not making you—

You keep your gaze on Jack.

David: Stay out of this, Mom.

Molly: David Griffith, I'll be damned if you—

You ignore her. Keep talking to Jack.

David: You just calm the hell down and sit—*Lucy barks yet again. That damned dog.* —Shut up, Lucy! *She growls at you, backing up to Jack's side, but shuts up.*

Jack doesn't. He keeps on shouting.

Jack: Now you want me to sit? Seemed like you were just fine talking without me here earlier.

Ben sighs and lowers his head, resting his hands on the back of his neck.

Ben: This isn't helping.

Can't tell whether he's talking to you or Jack, but you keep your conversation with Jack anyway.

David: Yeah, damn sure I am. And I damn sure can make the decision for you, but I thought you wanted to be part of it so what's it going to be, Jack?

Jack: Think I should have a say in what you want to do with my life!

You rub your temples with your fingers. Seriously? That old immature line?

David: Gosh, please—

Mom glances sharply between you and Ben.

Molly: *No one's going to make you do anything you don't want to do, Jack—*

You return the sharp glance. She's going to make this worse.

David: *Mom—*

Ben's head shoots up.

Ben: *Mom, wait—*

Molly, raising her voice slightly after being interrupted: *But I do think it would be good for you.*

A pause. Even Lucy stops growling. Only the clock ticks.

FOCUS ON *Jack as he stares at Molly in disbelief.*

It's like those bottles of water have been dunked on you. Cold. Freezing. Your teeth had chattered from the stupid shaking that happened when listening in, and now they chatter from a frost that seizes up your limbs like Luke Skywalker frozen on Hoth.

Betrayed. You expected this from your brothers. They've talked to you about school, told you there was a possibility you'd go back, but you had known Mom would stick up for you, known she would explain in her way why you aren't ready, really why you'd never be ready. But now, she says she wants you to go, to return to prison, to return to It. In fact, It stands behind her shoulder with a big, putrid grin, and Its bloody saliva drips from Its fangs onto Mom's hair.

All she does is speak words. Doesn't actually put you there. But that means you're already there.

Salt burns your eyes. Your chest muscles squeeze so bad, you're sure they'll snap your ribcage. She really is going to hand you back over to It. She really is going to let It happen again. She really has betrayed you.

Mom reaches across the table for you, as if she wants you to take her hand, as if she thinks nothing wrong has happened, or worse, as if she knows something wrong has happened and wants you to take her hand anyway.

Molly: *Just listen to what we have to say—*

It wriggles Its four eyes as It slinks towards you, darkly giggling as it picks up where It left off on the old nursery rhyme. Jack fell down and broke his crown—Like Mom, It reaches for you—And Jill—

There's no way you'll let It tumble you again.

You sprint for the stairs.

Jack: No!

Molly: Jack!

You pound up the steps, almost crush Lucy's left ear who jogs alongside you, trip on the top step, catch yourself, lunge into your room, and slam the door shut right after Lucy bolts in but just in time for it to crash into the wood.

FOCUS ON Molly as she jumps to her feet. Fresh tears burn your eyes. You know what you've done. You've broken your son's trust. You've done this with one son already, no, twice. You vowed to never do it again. Not with Jack. You have to fix it. You have to fix it fast.

A voice. A hand on your arm. No, stay. Another voice. Mom, let me talk to him.

A hand on your arm. A thick, heavy hand. You've felt this before. It's the one that was on your shoulder a few moments before, the one attached to the hot, alcoholic breath and the sardonic chuckle. He must've gotten angry at your crying. You told yourself you were showing too much emotion, and now you'll pay the price for it. Because you remember he hates crying.

A hand on your arm. Your brain blasts the signal like a weather alert blaring a flash flood warning: a hand on your arm, a hand on your arm, a hand on your arm—You lurch. Your chair flies back and crashes onto the linoleum.

But the hand doesn't let go. It's holding tighter. It's turned into a grip. Your forearm hurts. You remember what happens next when your forearms hurts: burning ears, locked closet, crying boy. No, not again. Please, God, not again. Get away, quickly. You got to get away quickly.

You jerk and twist and pull backward, throwing all the weight of your small frame into that tug. You scream with all your might, begging that thick, heavy hand to please just let you go.

Molly: Let go! Let go of me!

Mom! Mom!

The little boy cries for Mom. Cries for you. No, he's got him! This can't be happening. You fight harder against the squeezing hands, toss and turn, shriek so hard your throat burns.

Molly: Let me go! Please!

FOCUS ON David who holds Molly's forearm.

What the hell happened to Mom?

All you did was touch her arm. You asked her to stay back. Ben had said he'd go talk to Jack instead. Both of you knew the outcome would be better that way.

And then she flipped a switch. Started pulling away, sent her chair flying back so fast it smacked the floor. You said her name. So did Ben. You held onto her arm to make her look at you and snap her out of whatever frenzy she'd worked herself into.

Now, she flails hysterically, screaming for you to let her go. Her free arm smacks the table. She's going to hurt herself.

You jump to your feet. Grab her other arm. Try to make her still. Try to get her calm.

David: Mom. Stop it, Mom. Mom!

Molly: No! Let go!

Her eyes are closed. She fights your grip. Shrieks for release. Like you mean to trap her. Like you want to hurt her. Like you're—

Like you're him. The old man. Oh, hell. She's jumped back in time.

Her nails swipe at your face again. You jerk back. Ben says something. You grip her shoulders, pinning her arms down. Doesn't take much force with her small body.

David: Mom, stop. Mom—

She screams something. Tries to kick you. You jerk back before her foot lands in your shin. Ben's now coming around the table. You didn't want to do this. It's happened to her enough. But she's got to wake up.

You stare directly at her face. And you shake her.

David: Mom!

She stops. Her eyes snap open. Widen as they take in that it's you. Lips tremble to form words. And you realize you're both breathing sharply.

Molly, weakly: David.

She starts to sink and you quickly guide her to your chair. Set her down. Put a hand on her back.

David: *It's okay. You're okay. You're talking fast. Supposed to be talking to her but sounds like you're talking to yourself just as much. Where's these shakes in your hands coming from? It's what happens when Mom gets worked up like this, but you'd gotten that under control a long time ago. Cool it, man.*

Mom gasps for air as she folds her arms on the table and rests her head in them. Like she's hiding. Like she's praying for mercy.

Molly: *I thought—gasp—I thought—*

Focus on her. Focus on calming her which will get you focused on calming your own shaking hands.

David: *Doesn't matter. Doesn't matter, all right? You touch her shoulder. Lightly, this time, so you won't rouse another flashback. Let's just pull ourselves back together.*

You look up. Ben stands a couple feet away, glancing between you and Mom. You got her?

You flex your hand. The shakes are about gone. Yes.

You sure?

She'll be fine. I'll take care of it.

Ben nods and then turns to the steps.

Mom still struggles to breathe at a regular pace but she raises her head a little. When she speaks, it sounds as if someone's punching her chin.

Molly: *I'm—I'm so-sorry—*

David: *It's okay, Mom. Take a deep breath. You pick up the chair she knocked down and sit in it. Put a hand on her shoulder. Who's trembling? You or her? Her, of course. Your shakes are gone. Just breathe, all right?*

CUT TO the interior of Jack's room. A pile of laundry leans against a dresser whose top is littered with Lego sets, a crushed water bottle, and random pieces of paper. A small desk squeezes in a corner where, beneath papers, fidget spinners, food wrappers, and other miscellaneous items, a laptop hides. More laundry lounges on the folding chair before the desk. A skateboard and a basketball are stashed between the dresser and a nightstand that hosts a dusty lamp and alarm clock. Beside the nightstand is a twin bed shoved beneath the window whose open blinds allow the faint outside lights from the neighboring houses and the random car passing down the street shine through the already well-lit room due to the glow from both the overhead light and the lamp.

FOCUS ON Jack sitting on the bed. Lucy stands beside it, forelegs resting on the mattress and her doggy chin propped on her paws. She whines softly, staring up at Jack.

You've curled yourself into a ball, tugged the hood of your sweatshirt far over your head, drawn your knees to your forehead, buried your face in your thighs, wrapped your arms around your legs, like an armadillo madly seeking shelter. Because you're trembling uncontrollably and you can't get them to stop, but you've got to get them to stop, so the only thing to do to make them stop is the armadillo-curl where you squeeze your legs and tense all your muscles and whisper to yourself stop, stop, stop.

You've done this before when It attacked you. You realize you haven't done this move in a few years, but your body obviously remembers how to protect you from It. The ball makes you small: easier to pull your lanky arms and legs into a locker, easier to cower beneath a desk or huddle in a corner, or better yet, if you're lucky, easier to tuck yourself right under the teacher's chair. The ball makes the trembles stop: that way the big kids won't be signaled to come near you, that way the teacher won't notice and ask you questions you can't answer, that way the principal won't tell your Mom who will tell the doctor who will poke you with sticks and hit you with hammers and stick syringes in your mouth and say it's all good for you.

Lucy whines. You feel her wet nose bumping your leg. No, you don't want a hug right now, Lucy. You can't. You gotta protect yourself.

That's right. You gotta protect yourself. Because no one downstairs will, will they?

No. David cussed at you because he cusses when he's angry, which means he's angry with you but for what? For not being smart enough, obviously. Ben didn't say anything about it but instead kept telling you—you not David—to calm down, which means he's sided with David. He's obviously disappointed with you too. Didn't you hear him say something about you needing social skills, about him watching you flub up in public? You hadn't realized you'd been under surveillance. That he'd been watching you, taking notes, reporting all your mistakes back to the Empire so they could determine which fate suited you best: death by force-choke or in the Geonosian execution arena with It. You're not sure which hurts most: Ben siding with David or Ben spying on you when you thought he just wanted to spend the day with you.

And then there's Mom. Mom had chosen It. Mom, of all people. The kid inside you, the one scared by It, wants to cry. But you're not a kid, of course. So you don't. But the kid inside you wants to cry. So you let him. The kid inside you. The kid who remembers his mom leaving him with It, the kid who remembers his mom tugging his arms off her neck and saying, "I'll be right back," the kid who remembers his mom not coming right back but taking eternities instead, the kid who remembers his mom rubbing the welt on his head that a teacher had left, the kid who remembers his mom pressing his trembling body against her trembling body and promising she'd never, ever, ever, not even for a million dollars, give you back to It.

Yeah, you let the little kid inside you cry. You, however, need to focus on this armadillo move because the trembling still hasn't stopped.

A light knock. The doorknob twists. You hope it's Mom. Not that you really want to see her right now, but you do hope she's come up anyway to tell you that she's sorry, to tell you that it was all just a stupid idea from your brothers, to tell you that she was almost Jedi-mind tricked but she knows better than that and that she would never, ever, ever, not for a million dollars, give you back to it.

Lucy barks and you hear her patter to the door and scuffle around the person's legs, as if glad that person's there to help. Footsteps creak the floor. No, not Mom. Those footsteps are way too heavy.

The bed sinks as he sits in front of you. Just great. You do not want to talk with him. You pull your legs tighter to you so that your knees press against your chest and threaten to break through your skin and shoot straight out your back. You will not talk to him.

FOCUS ON Ben as he winces and grunts a little as he extends his legs further from the bed rather than fully bending them. Jack's mattress is too dang low for your stiff knees. Bending has always been a problem since you fell on that concrete carrying that stack of boards a few years back. Dang bootlaces. Lucy nudges your foot and looks at Jack before cocking her head at you with a slight glare. You smirk. You get the memo.

Jack hasn't spoken or moved since you entered, but you hear him breathing. Or not breathing, more like. His breaths are quick and shallow like he's finished running up more than stairs. He's worked himself up into a panic. You haven't seen him like this in a few years, probably not since Mom started homeschooling him, but you recognized all the signs downstairs as if no time had passed and he was still just the tiny kid with the too-big backpack and the too-big fears in a too-big world. You tried calming him down there but apparently you've lost your touch. Hopefully you'll figure it out again in a couple seconds.

Still nothing from Jack. He's going to be stubborn then. You sigh and push your ball cap up a little.

Ben: Jack?

He still doesn't look up or make any indication that he's heard you. But he squeezes his legs tighter. Uh-huh. He knows you're there.

Ben: Jack, you're panicking.

That rouses a response. Though muffled, you clearly hear the annoyance laced through his words.

Jack: I'm not panicking.

You scoff a little.

Ben: Oh, you're not? What are you, then?

Jack doesn't respond. Just digs his forehead into his knees and doesn't breathe right.

You put your hand on his shoulder. He tenses up and you squeeze it gently.

Ben: Take a deep breath. Come on, bud, let's calm down here, okay?

FOCUS ON Jack. *The last thing you want is Ben touching you. Here he is, squeezing your shoulder, calling you "bud," acting like he wants to help after he's described you as stupid to Mom and David, after he insinuated that you can't act normal without Mom's help, after he set you up with hanging out with him only to backstab you. You dig your nails into your shins, burrow your face deeper into your legs and in your hood so not a single sliver of light can get through because you know Ben wants you to look at him; but you won't.*

You want to shrug off his hand. Take a deep breath, he said. As if you're not—Wait. You're not breathing, are you? No. You've been holding it in. That's why your chest hurts. It's not your knees stabbing you that's causing the pain, it's the breath trapped inside you that's pushing against your bones in an attempt to break free. You inhale deeply but the breath gets caught on a bone on the way up and stabs you. Hard. Wow, this hurts. Breathing hurts.

Ben rubs your shoulder. Tells you again to take a deep breath. And now, you don't want to shrug off his hand. It's oddly comforting. Because it feels real. Even more real than It that lurked behind your door a few moments ago. In fact, you almost want to look at Ben now. Breathing would probably be easier if you got your face out of your lap and took off the hood. But you don't. You won't give him that satisfaction. But you will listen to him and try to take another deep breath because, oddly enough, you feel like Ben's hand will help draw the deep breaths out of you.

Inhale. A stab. Exhale. Another stab. This makes your chest hurt worse, but you know that it'll help ease the pain eventually. Ben's hand tells you so. So you breathe again. And again. And again.

FOCUS ON Ben as he takes his hand from Jack's shoulder. *All right, he's breathing normally now. He's still angry, which is why he still hasn't looked at you, but the anger comes from a panicked sense of the situation. You'll admit though, unlike David, that Jack's fears are understandable. Maybe not rational but understandable.*

Ben: Look. I know what you're thinking—

Guess you should've said that sooner because that finally elicits a reaction from him. Jack slightly raises his head and glances up at you darkly.

Jack: You don't know what I think.

Ben, curtly: I know you, Jack.

Lucy whines and nuzzles her nose in your hands, glancing up at you with big eyes as if asking why you snapped at Jack. Ever since Mom got her as a puppy four years ago, these two have been inseparable, and you almost swear that Lucy not only talks to Jack but also tries to talk to you in a weird way. You sigh, catching your temper. Whether an order from Lucy or not, your goal was to be the calmer one in the room.

You scratch Lucy behind the ears as you choose your words carefully for Jack. Lucy grumbles contentedly and sinks onto her haunches. You scratch her a little harder.

Ben: Listen. I know how this looks. And yes, I know what you're thinking. It probably seems a little unfair, like we haven't considered your opinion . . . and it probably seems like we've gone behind your back and swayed Mom. *You glance at him. Right?*

Jack swallows.

You nod.

Ben: Right. Look . . . *You rub your hand up and down Lucy's back, smoothing the hairs of her two-toned brown and white coat. . . None of us here want to do anything that'd hurt you. Least of all Mom. You look pointedly at Jack. You know that.*

Jack smiles sardonically as he turns his head to the window.

Really? How thick is his skull right now?

Ben, warningly: Jack.

Jack keeps his gaze fixed out the window.

Jack: I'm not going.

Ben: You've made that pretty clear.

FOCUS ON Jack as he stares at Ben, shocked. *Where has this sudden indifference in Ben tonight come from? He's always understood your school experiences, always known why you're socially awkward, always joked about and even tried to make you comfortable in certain situations. Is he fed up with you? Have you done something to make him no longer want to understand you? He's obviously written up a whole list for Mom of too many stupid blunders you've made that prove you're the oddball. Does he suddenly think everything that had happened with It was an act, a joke?*

Jack, quietly: Do you even know what that was like? To be labeled "slow?" Treated like you're retarded?

FOCUS ON Ben. You slowly scratch Lucy's neck and remove a piece of grass you found stuck in her hairs. Lucy seems to raise her brow at you. Yeah, no. Don't worry, Lucy. You won't pretend to understand Jack's prior school experience. You can't.

Ben, quietly: No. No, I don't. You look at him. But you got to go back to school. There's no way around it. You know that.

Jack rests his arms on his knees and buries his face in them again.

Jack: They'll teach me not to drop receipts, right?

That explains the stubbornness. Crap. How much of the conversation had he overheard? It was all out-of-context, and he's chalked it up as you deriding him, probably thinking you've taken the public-school side of believing he's mentally challenged.

Ben: I didn't mean it like that, Jack. You're taking this all wrong, bud. Come on.

FOCUS ON Jack as he lifts his head to look at Ben. You wish now you hadn't looked up because you stupidly let the little kid inside you cry, and now that little kid's tears have sneaked out and misted your eyes so you probably look even more like a dumb kid to Ben; but the little kid inside you won't stop crying, won't stop thinking of his inability to conform that never failed to always make him the stuck-out, sore thumb.

Jack, quietly: Did you ever have people mock you? Chase you around school until they cornered you? Did teachers humiliate you in class, knock your head with a book? Your breath catches on a chest bone again but keeps trying to go up your throat, so it keeps on tugging and bends your chest bone backward, making it creak, creak, creak from the painful pressure. I can't keep up. It'll all be backwards again. Now your voice cracks. It can't withstand the strain on your chest. It'll be backwards like I'm backwards and—You bury your face back in your legs to hide the stupid tears that sneak from your eyes. You squeeze your legs even tighter and tense your muscles and demand both the trembles and the tears to stop, stop, stop. But it's hard to make strong commands when you can't breathe.

Ben's hand is on your shoulder again.

Ben: Hey, come on, bud. Don't do this. Let's clear our heads for a moment.

You groan against your weakness and force yourself to breathe, to make your lung work against the bones barricading their way, to order the little kid inside you to stuff it. Again, you wish Ben would leave you alone, but again, you also want his big-yet-somehow-light-calloused-from-wood-carving hand to stay on your shoulder because it reminds you that you're not alone in the panic, that there's a rope in this black hole that threatens to swallow you.

FOCUS ON Ben as he rubs Jack's shoulder.

Ben: I'm not saying your fears aren't valid. But this will be different. Your teachers will know about your—

Jack: Great, so then I'll be the class idiot.

Ben: No, you won't be the class idiot, Jack. Jack. *You shake his shoulder slightly, trying to break through the brick wall that he builds around his mind. Jack looks up at you. You fix your gaze on him. This is going to be different. Trust me. Now can you come downstairs and talk with us about this? Just hear what we have to say?*

FOCUS ON *Jack as he licks his lips and stares at his knees. Lucy moves from Ben and puts her forelegs beside you again. You meet her gaze. She whimpers a little, ears drooping, as she nudges your thigh with her paw.*

Come on, buddy. Listen to good ole Ben. Let's hear what they have to say.

You lightly scratch her head. I know what they're going to say. You know it too.

She snuggles her nose against your leg to deepen the scratch. For Mom's sake, buddy. Just for Mom.

CUT BACK TO *the kitchen. Molly and David still sit at the table, and they look up as Ben and Jack enter. Ben's hand is on Jack's shoulder as he gently leads him to the table and has him sit in the chair beside Molly. Ben then takes the chair next to Jack.*

Molly blinks back a tear and touches Jack's hand.

Molly, quietly: Jack.

Her hand has always felt comforting to you, always felt warm and soft like a blanket was being wrapped around you to keep you safe. Now, it feels cold, callous, fake. You want to shrug it off more than you wanted to shrug off Ben's hand. But you remember what Ben told you upstairs about keeping an open mind, about not being mad at Mom because Mom only wants to help you and Mom actually hurts right now, so if you want to be mad, be mad at him and David.

So, you don't shake off Mom's hand. You just swallow hard and focus on a grain in the tabletop that you realize is a slightly lighter shade of brown than the rest.

David sighs and leans across the table towards you. He's waiting for you to look at him. It's why he taps his thumbs together, waiting-like.

David: You know what we want to do.

Ben said you could be mad at him and David. So you darn well will. You'll make sure David knows it too. The guy who chewed you out. The guy who called you immature. The guy who practically said you've made up all your problems. Little wonder you glare at him.

Jack: It won't work.

Mom squeezes your hand.

Molly: Honey, listen.

You'd rather glare at David right now who practically dares you to break his gaze than to look at Mom, but Mom's hand starts to warm again, starts to soften again, starts to feel real again; and though you want her to feel guilty for breaking her promise, you remember what Ben told you. It's hard, but you break your eyes from David and look at her.

Mom's eyes are red like she's been crying. In fact, she looks like she is fighting tears now. She licks her lips, like she's struggling to figure out how to talk to you. And this unnerves you a little, enough to make your toes scrunch up, preparing to spring your leg upwards. Because when has Mom ever found it hard to talk to you?

Molly, quietly: You know I would never, ever do something that would hurt you. I want to help you. Always, I want to help you. But—she swallows—I can't help you any more, Jack. God knows I want to. But I can't.

Never, ever, for a million dollars . . . She practically repeated the phrase; you heard it anyways. Of course she wouldn't, you see that in her red eyes now . . . but only if she could. You swallow the heat rising in your throat. She can't. She can't help you. And that's a scary thought, scarier than running away from big teenagers, scarier than a book slapping your head, scarier than Lt. Because moms are like Jedi Masters, either foreseeing the future or sensing when the slightest things are wrong and rushing in with a lightsaber or a wise proverb to save you. Your mom especially. But no more, she says. It's a scary thought that finally releases your toes so they bounce your right leg up and down, up and down.

Mom moves her hand to your bouncing knee. Warm and soft. Like a protective blanket. Your knee slowly stops bouncing. And though she never says it, you hear three words loud and clear through that hand: I'm scared too. She's speaking to convince you just as much as herself.

Molly: This will be good for you. In more ways than you think.

David clears his throat.

David: Whether there were problems or not, you got to finish your education, Jack. No one else here can finish it for you.

You wince, struggling to keep yourself from lashing out at your brother. He doesn't want to hear your opinion, doesn't want to consider other options, doesn't want to wait for you to process the weight of the topic alone and what it will mean for you. It's enough to send the little kid inside you kicking and screaming. Ben said you could be mad at them anyway. But you remind yourself that you're better than the raging kid who shakes the house of reason in your brain, knocking the furniture and kicking the walls to get you to lose yourself.

Jack: You don't know what it's like.

David: I know I don't. I'm not going to pretend I do. But we wouldn't do this if we thought it'd harm you.

You stare at the tabletop grain that you now know is definitely a shade lighter than the rest. They don't think it'll harm you but it will. You'll go back into that jail cell your mind has waiting for you, ready to relock you in its cold, iron bars until it has feasted on all the children it can find and now wants you. They don't know. They can't know.

Mom grips your knee. When she speaks, she can hardly raise her shaking voice above a whisper.

Molly: I'm sorry I can't do this for you. Don't be angry with your brothers. It's my fault, okay—

Ben shakes his head.

Ben: It's no one's fault.

David: No one is at fault here. His gaze sweeps over the three of you at the table, and the steady soundness of his voice even makes you look at him despite yourself. There's no one to blame. Not Jack, not Mom, none of us. We've all done our best with our limitations, and now, it's time to move on. We're only asking for one school year. One. If it doesn't work, we'll think of something else.

You stare at that odd-colored grain again. One school year? One lifetime. Why not one day? That will be enough to show you that your almighty-wisdom has failed, David.

David shifts in his seat so his gaze is in your vision. He waits for you to focus on him, and every eye muscle you have wants you to stay fixed on the table for so long that David has to demand you look at him, and even then you'd ignore him until your eyes burned from staring at wood for so long.

But that's the little kid inside you now trying to rip the logical wallpaper. You're better than that. So, you glance up.

To your surprise, he's not glaring at you. Just holding a steady gaze.

David: I really need you to do this for us, pal.

Us. Not just you. Us. This involves more than you, you practically hear David say as he stares at you. And as he keeps looking at you, you understand: It's for Mom just as much as it's for you.

There are no other options. You know it. Despite what you may feel towards your brothers right now, you know neither of them would keep forcing this on you if they hadn't considered it from every angle. Especially David. As much as Mr. Blunt and his cut-through-the-crap-attitude annoys you, it is what makes David the best angle solver. If there's a problem, you've always known David will fix it. Mom believes the same. That's probably why she agreed with him. Because she knows he's looked at every shape in existence until he found the one that fits you best. But you're trapped in the angle he's discovered, caught between the lines and the vertex that no equation can break. And you hate it. Hate it with every fiber of your being.

But hating angles never makes them go away.

You swallow. And you force your neck muscles and spine to do the one thing you fought them from doing since you crept down the stairs what now feels ages ago: You nod.

It's as if that was the signal Mom had been waiting for all night because she immediately stands and bends over you, enveloping you in her arms. She pushes back your sweatshirt hood and kisses your head, her tears falling into your hair. She holds you so tight that you feel her heartbeat thrum against your forehead. You squeeze her back, her always-soft shirt cradling your face, and breathe in her scent of lilac detergent and meatloaf and sunshine. The scent of Mom. The scent of safety. Your life may have just been flipped inside-out and wrong-side up, but if there's anything or anyone that can make your backwards-spelled life legible, it's her.

And you're going to need her.

CUT TO TWO HOURS LATER *in the living room where David and Ben sit alone. All the lights in the room and the kitchen behind it are off, save for a lamp on a side table. David reclines on the couch, his elbow resting on the arm, his head in his hand, and his eyes closed. Ben leans forward in an easy chair, his arms resting on his legs.*

FOCUS ON Ben *as he steeplers his fingers and flexes them.*

Ben: I didn't think Mom would take it that bad.

David keeps his eyes shut.

David: Not having second doubts, are you?

Ben: Course not. It's just . . . *It's just that Mom literally lost her mind tonight. You've never seen her react like that. Sure, she's had her flashbacks before but they have always been silent, solitary, still. Tonight was . . . was crazy. You look at David. She's never reacted like that before, David.*

Now David opens his eyes. He glances at you and then shifts in his seat as if trying to find a more comfortable position.

David: She's had bouts before.

Ben: Not like that.

David: It's nothing, Ben. She'll get over it.

You know that tone with David. Case closed.

You flex your fingers again. Pop a couple knuckles.

Ben: I just hope we're doing the right thing. For her. Jack is . . . *Jack is her distraction, you want to say. But you don't. Jack's what keeps her busy, you know.*

David rests his head back in his hand.

David: It'll be good for her just as much as it'll be good for him. She babies him too much. She can't keep harboring him.

Ben: Yeah, I know. And she seems like she needs a break.

David closes his eyes again with a sigh.

David: God knows she does.

You smirk. Because what else is there to do but smirk? Because if you don't make light of the situation, you'll think of the situation, and if you think of the situation, you'll think of what it might mean for Mom, and if you think of what it might mean for Mom, you'll know how it's not just nothing with Mom, that she won't just get over it, that taking Jack away from her for hours of the day may just be what turns a big "nothing" into a big something. You got a taste of it tonight. But you don't want to think of what all that might mean.

So you don't.

Three

The Great Divorce

SCENE OPENS in Molly's bedroom during the night. A slight hum comes from the box fan in the corner of the room, and a night light casts a pale, yellow glow in the otherwise dark room. FOCUS ON Molly as she dully stares at the bedroom clock on her nightstand.

2:59 A.M . . . 3:00 A.M.

You watch the red numbers flip to the next hour. You've stared at this clock all night now, and still, sleep evades you. You want to sleep, even if it's just for an hour. Oh, how welcome that would be to have sixty minutes of no thoughts, no voices, no memories pirouetting in their perfectly pitch-black slippers. But instead, sleep taunts you like a kid on the playground shrieking, "Can't catch me! Can't catch me!" Every time you reach, he jerks his shoulder away, laughs as he takes off, blows a raspberry at you. "Can't catch me! Can't catch me!"

You roll onto your back and sigh as you sweep back your damp hair with both hands. Is that sweat or tears on your cheeks? Who knows. Most likely both.

You failed Jack. Three words that were not spoken, but three words that you nevertheless heard, three words that nevertheless pierced straight through your heart and onto the crucifix behind you that you've born every day since that bottle split Jack's skull; three more nails hammered into the sign plastered above you proclaiming, "Here stands Molly, Queen of Failure."

Sheltered. That's the word they used to describe how you've raised Jack—David and Ben. "You've sheltered him." But all you noticed at the table, all you saw their eyes glint with, all you heard their lips form was failed. You failed Jack, Molly. You accused them of going behind your back, of assuming you were incapable, of stepping into the parental boundaries that are rightfully and legally yours and the ones that you fought so damn hard to keep. But did you fulfill your parental role? Didn't you let down the boundary for them to fully step in to, an invitation to take control of the ship that you can no longer steer?

Because who found the school? Who even took the initiative to look for a good school? Who realized that your knowledge had reached its limit and stopped living the fantasy you had created to find the reality you avoided? Naturally they stepped in the boundaries. Someone had to grab the wheel and keep the ship from sinking. Because it's only float or sink with you, isn't it Molly? There is no in-between, no middle ground. Jack suffers in school so hold him back a grade. Then Jack suffers in school so pull him out. Now Jack suffers at school so keep him home. You're a woman of extremes.

A woman of extremes. You've heard those words before, heard them used to describe you. By Ann. Ann described you like that . . .

. . .

You sat in court, Jack pressed to your bosom. You didn't know how he could sleep through the racket of your heart as Ann, seated like a goddess of war about to deliver justice in the witness stands, testified against you, levied evidence that proves you had no legal right to your children.

This turn of events didn't surprise you, didn't stun you. It broke you. After all, your divorce had been a cut and dry case, as your lawyer said it would be. Mr. Lawyer, in all his lawyerese, explained how Miles's abuse naturally turned the tables in your favor. The court already had to determine whether fracturing Jack's skull with a beer bottle convicted him of assaulting a minor, which, though negated due to his fancy lawyer pulling the right strings and knowing all the legal terms to make the court perceive the assault as not premeditated but rather the conditions of a toddler walking into a drunken stumble, definitely put the odds against him.

Mr. Lawyer also said that David's medical records would be used as evidence of Miles's abusive behavior and revoke his custodian rights, just like you wanted. That, coupled with the fact that you two were no longer living together as Miles was restrained from returning to the house, meant that this should be the quickest divorce case he ever oversaw.

And it was. You got everything—the boys, the house, the minivan, the restraining order. The only thing you grappled with was child support. Miles's lawyer was good and sharper than your own, you quickly discovered. An agreement was finally reached that hardly sufficed but was enough; you just wanted the divorce over and done with so that the only time you had to deal with that man's name was when it arrived on your monthly check.

No, the turn of events didn't surprise you. Ann's support surprised you.

Walter and Ann Griffith had never approved of you, but then again, they hadn't approved of their son either. His alcoholic and risqué lifestyle had earned their scorn and made the obligatory holidays—Thanksgiving, Christmas, New Years, and Easter—the four times a year Miles would tolerate them. Eventually, they became too intolerable for Miles, and he cut them off, more out of spite, you think, for as their only child, he kept their only grandchildren. Miles was good at spiting people like that. You remember how he'd shred the birthday and Christmas cards they sent to the boys. One time, he even burned the ten-dollar bill Ann had sent David, laughing that they had "money to burn." He wasn't even drunk.

No, there was no love lost between the parents and the son, but there was none for you either. So, when Walter and Ann offered to provide evidence against Miles to revoke his custody rights, you were too shocked to refuse. In the witness stand, both Walter and Ann brought forward Miles's violent behavior in high school and college, his brief encounter with drugs, his toxic relationship with his parents, and his dissociation from them which must have been to prevent them from discovering his paternal abuse. All this further proved Miles's mental instability and sealed his custodian rights as revoked.

You were surprised. You were grateful. You needed this apparent affection to help you navigate what to do next and provide a father figure and some stability for the boys. Miles had manipulated you to cut off your connections with your last foster parents after David was born, the only couple who had even given you support and stability. You needed that now more than ever from Ann and Walter.

Which is why you broke when, not a month later, you were back in the same court fighting again for your boys. But this time, to keep them for yourself.

Ann and Walter wanted your custody rights revoked. To them, you were just as unfit to raise the boys as Miles had been. How could you have kept them in those conditions for so long? How could you have continued to force your sons to undergo such emotional and physical pain? Two almost died two different times. You were obviously more than mentally unsound. You were a woman of extremes.

You hired a new lawyer. More expensive but more adept than your previous, they claimed. And your new lawyer told you it'd be a tough case. Your background, after all, didn't look good for you.

What do you mean?

Well, Mr. Lawyer explained, in all his legalese, according to some section in some letter of North Carolina's custody rules, the court terminates a parent's custodian rights if "the parent is incapable of providing proper care and supervision of the child because of mental illness, substance abuse, or other condition" . . . And, Molly, Mr. Lawyer had said, your hesitation to leave your clearly volatile spouse prior to the incident resulting in your divorce will be used against you as mental instability. David's medical records you used as evidence against your husband may very well be used against you. The catch is your mental volatility. That's the proof Ann has to bring to the table.

And she did.

Ann, that flaming goddess, sat in the witness box testifying against you, her steel-like eyes never relinquishing from your gaze. Every word came out hard, powerful, aimed at you like fiery darts that burned you alive.

She brought up everything, every granule of dirt that you had either swept under the rug, hidden from

the sterile eyes of the world or had made yourself forget: your questionable foster care experiences—was it your fault the state had given you to one alcoholic, two crack heads, and three deadbeats living off the system so that, yes, you stole from the grocery store as a preteen a few times and exhibited an unbalanced behavior that forced the state to move you to seven different homes in one year—your drug usage—it was one time in high school, on a dare—your club dancing performances without a license—that’s how you met Miles and it was him, of course, that let you get by without one; they were his clubs after all.

You had felt so dirty, so exposed as Ann and her lawyer stripped the poor clothes you had so painstakingly sewn when your boys were born to cover your past shame, and mortification scalded your exposed skin as Ann and her lawyer peeled off your layers one by one until you stood utterly humiliated in your little boys’ gaze, horrified at the sight of who their Mama really was.

Your protests and explanations didn’t matter. Ann’s lawyer produced records to prove the claims. And all of it suggested a questionable mental health, an unstable woman searching for stability and affection clearly in the wrong places and so clearly had no mental stability to raise children, let alone those struggling with mental trauma themselves.

And the judge and the jury considered it. And you held even tighter to sleeping Jack, jerked him away and practically buried him in your chest when Ann had the gall to stroke his hair as she passed by from the witness stand. And she looked at you with those steel eyes, those pure eyes revolted at your stains, those righteous, immortal-like eyes that proclaimed without a shadow of a doubt the boys were hers.

And when the Devil of a Prosecutor called Ben and David to the witness stand and Mr. Lawyer himself looked nervously shocked at these turn of events, you choked on your heart and had to cover your mouth to keep the salty reflux inside of you; for without a doubt, you were losing, stripped of your defenses just as your clothes had been stripped, just like Ann had stripped you bare to reveal a past to the court you had sought to conceal since David drew his first breath.

Ann. Ann. She sat upright, eyes fixed upon you. Even when you buried your face in Jack’s hair you felt her steel gaze boring into you, the goddess of war, the goddess of righteousness, stripping you of your dignity, stripping you of your boys. Hail, Ann full of righteousness, the evidence is with you.

Ben was first. You remembered his eleventh birthday was yesterday, and it was the crappiest birthday you’d ever given him. He had liked the Star Wars ballcap you’d gifted him, though it was too big, because Ben just loved ballcaps. In the witness stand, that too big ball-cap seemed to sink even lower on his ears as he shrunk beneath the Devil’s gaze. You remember he kept rubbing his hands on his knees and seemed a little out of breath. The Devil smiled, revealing his pointed fangs and forked tongue, and asked Ben if he knew why they were here. Ben nodded. David muttered beside you, “Like shit.” You thought the Devil glanced back at you. You put a rigid hand on David’s knee. David shrugged it off.

The Devil of a Prosecutor leaned on the witness stand, and Ben cowered in the chair. The Devil asked him if he had ever been scared his father would hurt him. Ben said he didn't know.

The Devil smiled. Now, son, remember: you swore to tell the truth.

You bit back an outcry of injustice. The truth had been contorted this entire session! But you remembered Mr. Lawyer said that any emotional display could be used as evidence against your mental stability. Lawyers were clever that way.

But Mr. Lawyer himself shot to his feet. Objection, your honor! Intimidating the witness.

The Judge glanced between the Devil of a Prosecutor and Mr. Lawyer before settling his gaze into your son. Ben rubbed his knees even harder as he stared up at the Judge as if looking up into the face of God, and in that moment, the Judge most certainly held sovereignty over your boy's life. The jury, the judge's angelic host, whispered among themselves.

The God-Judge kept his eyes on Ben. Objection denied.

Your honor—

Sit down, Mr. Lawyer.

The God-Judge told the Devil to proceed. He asked Ben a volley of questions, and Ben always answered in a quivering voice, "I don't know." The Devil of a Prosecutor never balked. Mr. Lawyer shook his head and rubbed his temples with each of Ben's answers. You wove your fingers through Jack's hair as fear wove its needle up and down your throat, choking you with its threads. You tried to smile reassuringly at Ben. But fear sewed your lips shut.

Did your father ever hurt you?

I-I don't know.

The Devil glared. The goddess sneered. The God-judge and his angelic host stared.

Y-yes.

And your father hurt your brother?

N-n-nod.

Did your mom ever tell you to tell someone about your father hurting you and your brother?

I-I don't know.

Did your mom ever tell you not to tell someone? Like keep it a secret from your teacher or school bus driver?

I-I don't-I don't know.

The Devil glared. The goddess sneered. The God-Judge and his angelic host stared.

Next witness.

David. Thirteen going on twenty-five. As he and Ben switched places, Mr. Lawyer leaned to you and muttered, "This isn't good at all." You almost glared at him only the needle had sewn your eyelids so they'd stayed wide. Of course it wasn't. This was hell, Sherlock. Was this what you paid him for, to state the obvious? You tried to give Ben a reassuring pat on the knee when he sat beside you. He shrank from your touch.

The Devil leaned on the witness stand. David glowered at him. The Devil smiled sympathetically. David scowled harder. The Devil said, "We've all seen your medical records and know what happened to you. We won't make you relive that trauma, okay? We're real sorry, son."

The God-Judge watched David. The angelic host leaned forward, interested. The goddess smirked at you. The Devil smiled sympathetically again and patted David's arm. David locked his jaw and jerked his arm away, crossing his arms. The Devil raised an eyebrow. David glared harder, and though he never spoke, you clearly heard his eyes say, "Sorry like shit."

The Devil glanced at Mr. Lawyer who watched as anxiously as you. And then the Devil spoke.

We just want an answer to one question, son. Just one and you can go: Did your mother ever tell you to keep your abuse a secret?

The God-Judge watched David. The angelic host perked up their ears. The goddess leaned forward. The Devil raised an eyebrow. David glared at him, jaw clenched, arms crossed.

The Devil glanced at the God-Judge and drummed his clawed fingers on the witness stand. Let me put it this way instead, son. Did you ever feel like you could tell anyone? Get someone to help you?

The God-Judge watched David. The angelic host glanced among themselves and back at David. The goddess arched a sharp eyebrow. The Devil waited.

And then David looked at you. What was that in his eyes? Anger? Bitterness? Disappointment? Shame? A mixture of them all? You swallowed. David turned back to the Devil of a Prosecutor, eyes narrowed, jaw clenched, arms crossed.

The Devil scoffed slightly and looked at the God-Judge. No more questions, Your Honor. He turned to the jury. And as we can see, the boy's silence speaks more than words.

Mr. Lawyer jumped to his feet. Objection your honor! Influencing the juror.

The God-Judge raised a hand. Objection heard, Mr. Lawyer. Mr. Prosecutor, if you please. Court dismissed.

The gavel banged.

The court adjourned. Jack woke up, and you assigned Ben to play Star Wars action figures with him to keep him entertained. Mr. Lawyer sighed and shook his head, muttering about how the past two questionings worked against them. You said the boys had a right to remain silent; you remembered the jury had been specifically instructed when this whole thing started to not draw conclusions from silence. Mr. Lawyer chuckled and said that did not revoke the judge's and the jury's rights to make implications.

And implications were made. The court reconvened, and the jury pronounced you as mentally imbalanced and your custodian rights therefore questionable. That was all you heard. Later, Mr. Lawyer had to explain to you that, while precarious, what was called the disposition phase was nothing to fear as the court would now examine whether Ann's evidence bore weight. For three months, a Parent Coordinator, or PC, would biannually visit your home and report findings to the court. So long as you maintained employment, kept the boys in school, and got them on a schedule that demonstrated a capable mother providing her children with a nurturing, stable environment, the case should soon be closed.

But in the court, as the God-Judge rattled off this verdict, as the gavel banged down, as the chairs slid back on the slick floor, as feet scuffed on the wood, as Mr. Lawyer sighed and tucked his papers in his leather briefcase, as Jack wriggled and climbed in his seat, as Ben stared at you with wide eyes, as David pulled Jack in his lap to make him still and kept his gaze away from you, all you heard were two phrases echoing as if in a tunnel:

Mentally unstable. Custodian rights questionable.

And then Ann had the gall to meet you in the parking lot. You gripped Jack's hand tighter. She wanted to hug the boys goodbye. Her audacity lit your blood hotter than the North Carolinian sun in July. You took a step forward, pressing Jack behind you, teeth aching as you clenched them and said, "You're out of your damn mind."

Ann locked her jaw as tight as yours. "I haven't seen my grandchildren in eight years. I've never even met this one." She bent over and reached for Jack behind you. You stepped back and shoved Jack's hand into Ben's, keeping your eyes on Ann. "Boys, get in the car. Now. Get your brother in his seat."

Ben took Jack. David stayed, arms crossed.

“David, get in.”

“I’m staying here.”

“I said get in the car!”

“That afraid of me, Molly?” Ann smirked.

Your nostrils flared as you glared at this woman, bony, gray-haired, frail, yet still possessing so much strength, holding so much power over you. One false word, one wrong move could be held as evidence against you. And Ann knew it too.

The minivan door shut. You never broke your gaze from Ann as you reached into your purse for the key fob and locked the car. Twice. The horn beeped.

Ann chuckled sardonically and crossed her arms. “So you are afraid. You see the situation, and that’s good. It’s best for the boys if there’s little—”

“I’m not afraid of you, bitch.”

“Oh, that sounds like the children are in a wholesome environment. Looks like you’re off to a great start with the PC.”

You gripped the fob until the key cut into your palm and blood snuck from your skin. Gravel crunched beneath David’s sneaker.

Ann dropped the sardonicism and lowered her arms. “The boys are mine, Molly, whether you like it or not. You know it; I know you do. It’s best for them if there’s as little resistance from you as possible. The PC will drag this whole thing out, but the sooner we get this over with the better. If you cooperate, I’ll make sure you have visitation rights.”

“Is that a threat?”

You could use this against her in court. Ann smirked. “Consider it a suggestion. For the boys’ sake. Isn’t that why we’ve done what we’ve done?”

She had walked away, wedges clicking against the blacktop like a goddess preying on the souls of her people. And Ann, goddess of war, gripped your very soul in her cold clutch, daring you to try and pry her fingers open and take back the three parts of your life. Her hold was so strong on your soul. So strong.

In the car, you tried to shake off Ann's cold fingers, tried to show the boys that the fear they had surely seen was nothing more than their imagination. David had decided to sit in the back rather than in the passenger seat beside you. You shrugged that off too, telling yourself he needed space.

You glanced up in the rearview mirror with a smile. "Y'all hungry? Wanna grab a bite?"

The loud silence that answered you, disrupted only by Jack's toddler babblings as he made Darth Vader battle with what's-his-face, screamed of the illegitimacy of your facade. The jig was up.

You turned the droop in your smile up as you simultaneously turned into the left-lane. "I know y'all got to be hungry. I'm starved."

Jack paused his battle. "I hungry!"

You smiled a little bigger. "Yeah? What do you want to eat?"

Jack resumed the lightsaber fight. You chuckled softly.

"Ben, what about you? Where should we eat?"

Nothing.

You glanced in the rearview mirror. Ben stared out the window, hands clutching the arms of his seat. Something was wrong with his face, but you couldn't tell what it was with him looking away. You repeated the question.

Still nothing but Jack hosting a lightsaber battle.

You glanced in the rearview mirror again. From the back, David stared up at Ben expectantly. Ben gazed out the window, fingers digging into the fabric of the arm rests as if he hoped he could puncture them.

Stop light. You flipped on the turn signal then turned in your seat, looking at Ben. "Ben, hon. What do you feel like?"

The turn signal clicked once, twice, thrice.

Finally, Ben met your gaze. Finally, you saw what was wrong with his face. Fear scrunched it like playdough, contorting it into the wrong shape, squeezing so hard that tears popped into his eyes and his voice cracked when he answered.

“I feel like it’s my fault.”

David leaned forward. “It’s okay, Ben.”

But fear must have squeezed Ben’s chest as his breathing labored, and he shrunk back in his seat, tucking his head in his shoulders as if hoping the fabric would somehow open up and zip him up inside the seat. “But I-I didn’t answer. And now—now they’re going to take us away, and it’s all my fault—”

David touched Ben’s shoulder. “Ben, it’s okay.”

“No, Ben.” Heat flared in your hand as you reached for Ben’s trembling kneecap. David cast you a look as he withdrew his hand and sat back in his seat. This time, Ben didn’t pull away at your touch. “Listen to me. No one’s—”

Car horns blared. You muttered a curse as you whipped back around in your seat and slammed on the gas. The boys jolted at the sudden impact. One of Jack’s action figures smacked the window and he yelped. The blasting of the horns matched the blaring sirens that raged in your brain as you jerked the van left and then left again into a nearby parking lot. You didn’t even turn off the ignition as you clicked your seatbelt off and whirled around onto your knees so you fully faced the boys.

“Listen to me carefully. Both of you.” Ben’s lip trembled as he stared up at you. David shifted his gaze to the floor. “No one’s taking you away from me. Do you hear me? Do you hear me?”

David glanced at the car floor and picked at some loose threads in the car bench. Ben moved his grip to his knees and glanced out the window. Jack stopped playing and stared at you with big eyes.

It was then you realized you had raised your voice. You had shouted. Holy crap, Molly, that wasn’t your job. That was Miles’s job to shout and hurt ears. With trembling fingers, you tucked some loose hair behind your ears and flashed a smile at Jack that you were sure shook as much as your hands.

Jack smiled back and resumed his Star Wars fight. You turned your shaking smile to the boys who still wouldn’t look at you. “We’re going to be okay.”

Ben swallowed. “But they’re sending someone to our house. Someone to come get us—”

You shook your head as you placed a firm hand on his knee again. “No. They’re not coming to get you. Listen to me—listen to me, Ben.” You shook his knee a little. He finally looked at you. “Someone’s just going to come to our house every so often to look around, make sure everything’s okay—”

“Watch us, you mean,” David muttered.

You shot him a look. He glanced up at you darkly before returning his gaze to the floor. You resisted the urge to question his look, reminding yourself that the raging sirens rattling your bones were flipped on by Ann and the damn State, not David. You patted Ben's knee, returning both him and you to the moment.

"They're just coming to make sure Mommy has the house cleaned, and that you're going to school, and that we're all happy, okay?" Yeah, that's all they were going to do, Molly. Nothing to worry about.

Ben swallowed again. "But why?"

David glanced up at you. You saw the sarcastic response dancing on his lips, but he didn't say it. Just rolled his eyes at you before looking at the floor again.

You fixed your gaze on him as you rubbed Ben's knee. "Just because they want to make sure Mommy knows how to care for you. Some mommies don't, and they want to make sure that I got your bellies nice and full." You then looked into Ben's doubtful eyes. "No one's taking you away. Ever. We're going to win this thing."

Jack plunged what's-his-name's lightsaber into Darth Vader's belly with a dramatic howl. You smirked and pointed at him. "Just like that, see?"

Ben laughed and you chuckled with him as Jack jerked his head up, wondering what so funny. He grinned at you and Ben. David looked out the window.

You turned back around and fastened your seatbelt. "Now, what should we eat?"

Jack exclaimed, "rench 'ries!" What's-his-face clattered to the floor. "Oops."

You grinned as you pulled the minivan back onto the street and headed towards the McDonald's. Ben smiled and reached down to pick up the action figure. "French fries," he corrected, emphasizing the fs, as he handed Jack back what's-his-face. "What do you say?"

"Dank you!"

What do you say . . . That's what you asked yourself when, two months later, the PC asked you if you knew the cause of David's recent violent behavior and asked how you were handling it.

Within a week of the court's decision, you had found part-time employment at Food Lion and gotten the boys on a strict routine. Everyone hit the deck at 6:00 a.m. and ate a breakfast of hot or cold cereal before heading out the door no later than 7:35 a.m. You dropped Jack off at preschool at 7:50 a.m. and got the boys to their middle school no later than 8:05 a.m. You got to Food Lion at 8:20 a.m. and got

off at 3:00 p.m. in time to pick up Jack and then the boys no later than 4:15 p.m. All homework had to be finished by supper, and everyone had their lights off at 10:00 p.m. at the latest. No exceptions.

Little wonder that the biweekly visits the first month went smoothly. The only hiccup was when the PC, during her usual Q+A with the boys, asked David if he felt safe with you and he told her, arms crossed and eyes narrowed, exactly where she could go. You scolded him both in front of the PC and after she had left, certain that his vocabulary would be yet another tiny detail used against you. The PC had merely smirked and scratched her pen on her clipboard, claiming she'd heard worse.

But the second month, Miss PC wanted an answer for David's actions. She had checked in with the boys' school and discovered that, in two months alone, David had been in detention five times for disrespecting his teachers and currently averaged a D. Within two weeks, he had started two different fights that had resulted in a parent-teacher meeting when David's victim of the second fight had to get eight stitches in his nose.

What do you say . . . Miss PC wanted to know if you knew the source of David's sudden violence and if you were taking the school's advice on getting him counseling. You forced a weak smile, said that, what with David now being fourteen, he probably was experiencing teenage angst. You would handle it, get him under control. Miss PC had leaned forward, tapped her little pen against her big clipboard, and told you that you used the wrong c word. It wasn't control that David needed—he'd had enough of that in his life; it was counseling. Psychologically, David wasn't exhibiting teen angst but rather an irrational lashing out expected of an abused child seeking to release his inner trauma as a result of not understanding how to manage it; counseling would teach him how to healthily embrace and heal from his trauma without causing harm to others or to himself.

You thanked Miss PC for her advice. Miss PC arched an eyebrow and scratched some more on her clipboard. Have you spoken with David? Have you asked him how he feels? Have you asked him why he fights? Have you asked why he lashes out at his teachers? Have you asked him if it truly makes him feel better? Have you asked him to talk with you about his feelings?

You clutched your coffee mug. Who did this damn woman think she was, telling you what kind of questions to ask your son? As if she knew him and you didn't. As if she had lived through those moments with David and you hadn't. As if it were her who had sat beside that hospital bed and whispered every prayer she knew like a wretched sinner struggling to escape Purgatory and not you. As if she had the power that you lost to wring more than a mumbled "good morning" and "good night" out of David.

You forced yourself to keep a smile stretched on your lips; Miles had taught you well. You were handling the situation, Miss PC. Thank you for your time. More coffee?

No, she didn't want coffee. She wanted to see visual improvement in David and hear a good report from the school by her next visit. Counseling, Molly, counseling.

That's what Ann told you too. The goddess, in her supreme wisdom, had also checked in with the school and completely agreed that David needed counseling. She left you a voicemail that very afternoon. Now, Molly, you're not a dumb woman and want what's best for your boys. We both do. You'll naturally put David in counseling. I've found two reputable therapists who specialize in counseling traumatized teens, and I have their numbers—

You deleted the message before the all-knowing goddess spouted the first area code. So you weren't good enough to raise your son and now you're not intelligent enough to control him? You slammed the phone into the receiver and kept pressure on it, as if you could shove the phone straight through the receiver and into the kitchen counter itself, resisting the urge to chunk it against the wall. You were the mother. Not the State, not the PC, not the school, not Ann. You.

And you lost it that night.

You'd never been a yelling mom; Miles did enough of it. But that night, Mr. Lawyer had called you, told you he'd spoken with some high and mighty people of the State and discovered that Miss PC's latest report was not making things look good on your end. You only had one month left before the next trial so like hell you'd better get your son under control or Ann would be determining the boy's therapist, not you.

As soon as Mr. Lawyer hung up, you called "David Griffith!" into the kitchen. That was the first time you remember ever calling for one of your boys with a tone so hard and loud. He came around the corner as if waiting for you, and he stood in front of you, silent, as you shrieked and slammed your hand on the counter and swore expletives you hadn't uttered since your club days, demanding to know what he was thinking, demanding to know how he could do such a thing, demanding to know what his problem was, demanding to know why he wanted trouble.

"I'm here busting my ass to keep us together, and you're doing everything possible to tear us apart! Do you want to be taken from me? Do you want to live with Ann, is that it?"

That finally evoked a response. David locked his jaw and crossed his arms, feet spread wide as preparing for a physical fight, eyes hard. "Maybe I don't know what the hell I want, how's that, Mom?"

His look alone was enough to snap on the switch of Mama Anger inside you. Your throat practically burned from the fire of your words as you shrieked, tears of rage moistening your eyes. "I'm trying to make this work, damn it! You think I like this shit? You think I want this for us? I'm trying to protect you!"

He scoffed and looked at the linoleum floor, rolling his tongue in his mouth.

“What?”

“Nothing.”

“Don’t you ‘nothing’ me, David Griffith. What? Say it.”

He didn’t just look at you; he glared at you, just like he had glared at the Devil of a Prosecutor. He rolled his tongue in his mouth again, as if considering defying you, but you glared right back at him, silently demanding the words leave his mouth.

And they did.

His voice was quiet, much quieter than yours had been, but the words were just as sharp. “Little late for that, isn’t it?”

It was as if you were a house fire immediately doused by a hurricane. The storm bashed against you, rattled your wooden legs and threatened to topple you so you sank into a kitchen chair. The wind chilled your hot tears so freezing rain dripped down instead, and you dropped your head in your hand to hide the storm. The fire in your throat was vanquished by an icy wave that choked you, pushed you down into the water and then up spluttering so you barely croaked, “Go to bed.”

And he did. Without any hesitation, he left when you told him. The coldness of his obedience shocked you as greatly as his words. If he had hesitated, if he had defied you just a bit, wouldn’t it have shown some regret, the slightest whisper of, “Mom, I didn’t mean it”?

But there had been none. You failed him. You failed him, Molly. After ten years, you want to save him. You bit your lip to keep him from hearing the sobs slashing your chest.

David never had to bite his lip though. You’ve always fought to be silent—hands over your mouth, holding your breath, burying your face in a pillow; David just was silent. You admired that about him, though he was but a boy. But you also hated it about him, like that one car ride you’ll never forget.

The day following Hurricane Molly was Saturday, David’s work day. When the divorce started, David had found Miles’s old push mower in the garage and wanted to mow neighbors’ lawns. You didn’t refuse; it was one of the best ideas you’d heard in a while. It’d give him a little pocket change, give him something productive to do, give him a good reason to get out of the house. You found yourself wanting to get him out more and more, though you hated yourself for those longings.

The other side of the neighborhood was primarily populated by the elderly who didn't mind paying a few bucks to a young teen willing to push-mow their acre lots. So, you'd drive David to the other side of the neighborhood and drop him off for a few hours. When the PC started coming around, you made sure you locked the front door yourself and ordered Ben to stay inside with Jack for the ten minutes you were gone. You then made sure David had your cell phone and drilled through that hard skull that if the slightest thing went wrong, he was to call the house immediately. There'd be no loose ends for Miss PC to unravel.

That Saturday, though, the five-minute drive to the other side of the neighborhood felt like five hours. David wouldn't speak, wouldn't even look at you. He'd kept his eyes on the ground as you two walked to the van, and then he stared straight out the windshield, not glancing once in your direction. You did though. You looked, you glanced, you cleared your throat, you tapped the steering wheel. And then you second-guessed yourself. Perhaps your son needed space. Perhaps he didn't need more noise in his already too-loud life. So, you bit your tongue, chewed your lip, swallowed your words.

David sat there, perfectly silent.

What was he thinking? Obviously angry at you and rightfully so but about what specifically? He'd been irritable ever since the divorce started, and you knew it had to be from fear and anxiety; it began because Miles cracked Jack's skull with that beer bottle, after all. But his dark mood shifted even worse after that day in court when he witnessed the resurrection of your dead lifestyle by the goddess Ann. Was he ashamed of you? Confused by you? Worse, did he hate you?

Ms. Johnson on the corner was always your stop. David unbuckled without a word, but you couldn't keep trying to swallow the too-big words that wouldn't fit down your throat. You turned and fully faced him.

"Can I talk to you? Please."

The seat belt slowly drew back, the buckle clattering against the door. David turned forward, folding his hands, staring at the floor. He waited for you to break the silence again; it wouldn't be him, would it?

You sighed and tucked a loose strand of hair behind your ear. Why were your hands shaking? This was your son you spoke to, not the PC or Mr. Lawyer or Miles.

"Honey, last night . . ." David's eyes hardened. You swallowed. "Listen, I know you're going through a lot right now. It's hard on all of us."

David twiddled his thumbs, gazing at the van's floor as if it had dared him into a staring contest. Did you say the wrong thing again? Were you saying the right things? Was this how you spoke to a teen?

Was this how you were supposed to console him? How do you have a conversation you never had? How do you speak words never spoken to you?

You sighed again and looked out the windshield. The engine hummed.

“But what I said . . . what I’m doing . . .” Find the words, find the words. “It’s because I’m trying to help you.” You looked back at him. If only he would return your gaze, see the sincerity in your eyes. “I’m trying, David.”

Would he give you the smallest indication that he understood you, that he believed you? Would he just look up? Would he just nod or shake his head? Would he just sigh? Would he just swallow? Would he just—

He spoke.

“Can I go now?”

You gripped the steering wheel and braced as his words left-hooked your jaw. Quickly, you clenched it to stop the trembling. “Yeah. Yeah, you can go.”

The passenger door jerked open then slammed shut.

You inhaled and the leather of the steering wheel creaked beneath your palms. It was fine, Molly. Yeah, it was fine. You exhaled and rolled your tense shoulders as David pulled the mower from the back of the van. He just needed some space and time; that was all it was, right? Maybe even when he finished cutting the grass today, he’d be bett—

Don’t forget to remind him to call you. The last thing you needed was something to go wrong for Miss PC right when you were so close to finishing.

You looked over your shoulder. “Hey, hon, remember to—”

The trunk slammed. The push mower rattled up the sidewalk.

Oh, God. Was that a thought or an actual cry that fled your lips? You wanted to lay your head on the steering wheel and weep and scream to God, “What have I done?” But even if you did, would He hear you? Did you have the strength to pierce the heavens? Could you make God mourn with you, weep for you? They abused His Son too, but He had intervened, washed the wounds, delivered justice to His abusers. You, however, hadn’t had the guts to save your son. His Son certainly wouldn’t pity you now.

Besides, what would that prove to David who surely still watches you? That you're the weak mother you've always been. No, this is your penance, the retribution for the crimes committed against your son, the judgment for not acting sooner, your most grievous fault. And it is truly right and just.

You sniffed and swiped at the tears you didn't realize had crept from your eyes. Get a grip, Molly. Come on. You still have two other boys waiting for you.

Two boys waiting for you to finally save them.

You heard the shouts and shrieks before you saw them. The black Cadillac Escalade hid them from your view. But the fact that there was a black Cadillac Escalade that didn't belong in your driveway, and the fact that the screams came from the black Cadillac Escalade that didn't belong in your driveway, and the fact that you recognized the shouts and shrieks as your boys' coming from the black Cadillac Escalade that didn't belong in your driveway—all made you slam on the breaks before you even turned in. The tires screeched as you shot-gunned yourself out the door like a raging cop and flew up the driveway.

Ann, goddess of war, had laid siege to your home.

You took in her blockade as you bolted up the driveway: Ben frantically clung with one hand to a car seat in the back of the Escalade, and with the other he pushed away at Ann, shouting incoherently. Ann tugged at his waist, feet spread in a wide stance on the pavement, head constantly ducking his hand, teeth clenched as she demanded Ben to "stop this nonsense." Jack was invisible, but his panicked cries of "Mommy!" echoed from the Escalade.

You charged. Your aim was to tackle Ann, but before your claws sank into her cheeks, Ben rammed his elbow in her mouth. Ann moaned and released him, clutching her mouth as she stumbled back, doubled over. You tugged Ben from the vehicle, shoving him towards the house, and reached inside for Jack, strapped in the car seat. He arched his back and tugged at the straps across his chest, fighting to free himself from the buckles. Tears spilled down his red cheeks as his throat rattled with cries for you.

You flung off the buckles and pressed Jack to your bosom. Jack squeezed your neck and buried his face in your hot skin, still crying over and over, "Mommy! Mommy!" You spun around and grabbed a stunned Ben, pushing him behind you as you faced Ann, keeping the Escalade between you and her as a barrier.

Jack's tears on your skin watered the seeds of fury that sprouted within you and their hot shoots plowed through your veins, deeply rooting into your very marrow. Kidnapping. That had been Ann's prerogative. Kidnapping your babies, your cubs, who were legally and rightfully yours. So like a raging Mama Bear, you roared.

You don't remember everything you said, but you do remember you shouted every expletive you knew as you ordered that woman to leave your driveway. Ann fought back just as hard and loud, her swears and insults poking and prodding the bear fighting to claw its way out your flesh. Later, you wondered if Jack's crying and Ben's trembling came from fear of Ann or fright at your terrible mouth. In that moment, though, you let their panic fuel your anger and release the antagonized bear on Ann to rip her to shreds.

You, a mere mortal, dared to battle with the goddess.

It was grisly. Blood trickled down Ann's lips from where Ben had elbowed her, but she continued to fire bullet after bullet upon you: you were unqualified to have children, you didn't deserve to keep the boys, you be prepared for a shower of legal battles to fall upon you and send you crashing to hell. You took the bullets in your thick hide and continued to claw at her, tearing the skin from her bones as you laid expletive upon expletive on her.

Ann scoffed and spread her arms wide, taking in the neighboring houses. "Sounds like they're in a nurturing environment. Should I ask the neighbors to testify?"

Where were the damn neighbors? Why was no one at your side? "Get the hell out of my driveway before I call the police for kidnapping and trespassing!"

She declared you only proved her point. She jabbed a bony finger at her bleeding mouth. "Look at this. You've provided nothing but a violent environment for these boys. Look what the abuse taught them. Don't think I won't use this as evidence of your lack of maternal abilities!"

"Rich coming from you!"

"The boys will be mine, Molly, and you know it." The blood trickling from her mouth made her look like a thirsting vampire, ready to suck your boys from you. "You're drawing this out, making it worse for them. For once in your damn life, think of them!"

"I am their mother!" At last, the words trapped in bosom since the first day of the damn trial tore through you. You shrieked them, proclaimed them like God declaring His holy name, for in that moment, you were the great I AM, the ultimate and rightful founder of your boys' lives. "I. Am. Their. Mother!"

"By what right, Molly? A club fling?" Spit and blood joined the bullets flying from her lips.

This time, the bullets burrowed deep, leaving gaping wounds, but the agony only encouraged the bear to fight harder. You told Ann where she could go and what she should do to herself there.

You don't remember if that or your threat to call the police again was what enticed Ann to climb back in her black Escalade and roar out your driveway. But you do remember shaking so hard that you almost dropped Jack, and you remember hustling Ben inside, locking the door in preparation for the next attack, gasping at the overturned furniture in the kitchen and living room, and then whirling on Ben, demanding to know how the hell Ann got inside.

Ben gaped at the raging bear in front of him, trembling in its shadow. "I-I-I thought it was you—"

"Damn it, Ben, I have a key! How many times have you told you to never answer the door? HOW MANYTIMES?"

Jack shrieked. Hot tears warmed your collarbone, and you felt him shaking as he gripped your shirt collar harder, tiny nails digging into your skin. You were scaring him, Molly. The bear vanished as if it had never evolved and left instead just the Mama, the Mama mimicking the father you had taken them from. You cursed and screamed just like him, Molly. You were supposed to be different. You were supposed to be the quiet, comforting mother. Jack had already been scared out of his wits. Why hadn't you comforted him yet?

You sunk onto the couch before your legs slipped out from under you. You pressed Jack close and hoped your racing heart wouldn't stimulate his own, kissing the top of his head, stroking his hair, rubbing his shaking back. "Shh, it's all right. Mommy's got you. I got you. It's all right, it's all right."

A sharp intake of breath. Ben.

His jaw shook as he struggled to speak, but no sound except rapid breathing escaped his lips. Tears sat in his eyes like two buckets full of water, but not one of them leaked.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to yell at you, okay?" You took his trembling arm and gently tugged him towards you, struggling to steady your voice so you could steady his trembles. "Mommy's just sc—" No, don't tell him that, Molly. You can't be scared any more. You've got to be brave for them all now. "Mommy just got really angry, but I didn't mean it. I—"

Now you sucked in a breath. Red finger marks crisscrossed against Ben's face. That bear threatened to evolve inside you again and growl as you gripped his arm a little. "What happened to your face? Did she do this?"

The buckets finally overflowed and tears rolled down his cheeks, glistening on his flushed skin. He sucked in a trembling breath, his lips struggling to form words. Oh, god, what did she do? She was truly Miles's mother, monster birthing monster. You'd kill her. You'd tear your claws into her, dig out her eyes, carve her flesh, leave her carcass to the vultures for daring to touch your cubs—

A tear dropped into Ben's mouth. "You-you said I was like him. And-and they took us away from him." His voice slightly rose in pitch as he drank the water pouring from the wells of his eyes. "So now-now-" His voice cracked. "Now we're going to be taken from you because I'm like him. And it's all my fault. I'm so sorry, Mom-"

"No, no!" You pressed a firm yet gentle hand on his cheek. His tears warmed your fingers as you brushed them away. "Look at me. That's not what I-"

He didn't hear you. Fear-Ann-had shut his eyes as well as his ears, and he kept choking as the trembles raced up and now his arms. "I'm sorry it's my fault, I'm sorry it's my fault-"

"Benjamin Griffith, look at me. Look at me." He took a breath and opened his eyes. You stared into them for a moment: blue like Miles's, alive like Mile's; but that's where the resemblance ended. Because staring back at you were eyes blue with compassion, guilt, terror. You hated yourself for letting those words slip from your lips. You couldn't take them back, but perhaps you could bandage the wounds they left.

You brushed his damp cheek with your thumb. "You did the right thing. You protected your brother. There's a big difference. And-hey, listen to me. Listen to me. No one is taking you away from me. They're not taking Jack or David or you. No one." You swiped yet another tear from his cheek. "I got you. Okay?"

Ben crashed into you. On his knees, he burrowed his face in your stomach. He wept silently, but your dampening shirt and the trembles racking his shoulders screamed louder than a kneeling penitent saint pleading, "Holy Mother, save me." And while his terror weighed on your heart, you couldn't deny the relief his cleansing tears brought you as they washed away the doubt: Ben wanted you. Jack wanted you. Both needed you. Ann and the State could deny it all they wanted, but these boys were yours-not just legally with a law chicken-scratched by man on a flimsy piece of paper, but by a higher law that holy bonded mother and son and declared them indivisible.

You pressed Ben close and kissed his hair. The heads of both your boys pushed against you and begged you to save their lives, much as their heads had pressed against you and begged for life not so long ago. Jack reached out his small hand and touched Ben's head. You glanced down at Jack who was no longer frightened but rather confused at seeing Ben cry.

You smiled faintly and pulled both of them closer to you, whispering, "We're going to be all right. I got you both, you hear me?"

And you prophesied correctly.

When you'd calmed the boys, you immediately called Mr. Lawyer. To your surprise, Mr. Lawyer said this was good news. Take pictures of Ben's scratched face and the overturned house before you did anything else. They would not only use this incident to question Ann's mental stability and suggest to the court that Miles's insanity was heredity, thereby questioning her ability to raise the boys, but they would also charge her with both physical assault and kidnapping and threaten to press charges if she didn't drop the case entirely.

Ann chose the latter. A case that had lasted for three grueling months suddenly ended in three days. The court declared that the boys seemed satisfied enough with their mother, and that the PC's records demonstrated Molly was just as capable to raise them as Ann would have been. Mr. Lawyer, with all his fancy lawyerese, even got a hundred-foot restraining order on Ann for good measure.

The boys were yours. Case closed.

"Congratulations, Ms. Molly." Mr. Lawyer shuffled his many papers and slipped them in his fancy briefcase. "You should celebrate."

Celebrate. That's what you had thought you'd do if the case ever ended well. You'd thought you'd whoop, holler, maybe even dance with joy—all which you couldn't remember yourself doing. But instead, though the goddess had been dethroned, though the State's agent no longer spied on your home, though the rough waves had finally stilled, you felt no celebration. Instead, you felt exhausted, drained, defeated. What were you to do now?

But you made yourself whoop, holler, and dance for the boys. In the court's parking lot, you high-fived a beaming Ben and swung a giggling Jack, whooping, "We won!" You shoved back Ben's too-big ballcap, kissing his forehead and declaring, "You're staying with me, Ben Griffith," before scooping Jack in your arms and blowing his belly. Jack squealed with laughter. David crossed his arms and leaned against the minivan.

You set Jack down and declared a celebration: no school or work tomorrow. They'd instead binge-watch Star Wars and eat pizza and ice cream. Ben whooped and Jack mimicked him before the two engaged in a mini lightsaber duel, rife with sound effects. You chuckled and then noticed David. He still leaned against the van, arms crossed, staring dully at you, but when you met his gaze, he quickly looked down. Your smile cracked but you quickly pasted it together again. Miles taught you better than that. This was probably just David's way of processing the whole thing. No big deal.

"All right, my Jedis, let's go home." You scooped up Jack who blabbered something that made you chuckle and playfully bite at his hand as you fastened him in his car seat. But his toddler mumblings and your momentary glee both slowly faded from you when you realized Ben never corrected you—"It's Jedi, Mom, not Jedis," he'd always say—and you noticed David climbing into the back bench again, not the passenger seat. You glanced up, absently agreeing with whatever Jack just said, and caught Ben

looking over his shoulder at David. Worry had replaced the joy that had danced in his eyes just moments before, and he quietly asked, "Aren't you happy, David?"

"Shut up," David mumbled, fastening his seat belt. Ben swallowed and slowly clicked his own seatbelt.

"Moosic, Mommy."

You forced yourself to smile at Jack and ruffled his hair. "All right, just a moment." You shut the van door. You shut your eyes and took a deep breath. You shut up the voices in your head testifying that you had just won the worst game of your life. David hadn't hoped you'd lose him; he just needed time to process it. That was all. Tomorrow would be better.

It was better for Ben and Jack. You remember refereeing their light-saber-bacon-strip battle over breakfast and building a mountain of blankets and pillows on the couch where you watched way too many Star Wars movies; you think David went to his room. You remember cuddling with Jack and falling asleep in the afternoon and waking up in time for an epic lightsaber battle between what's-his-face and the soon-to-be-Darth-Vader-guy which restored all of Jack's energy; you think David poked his head out a couple times. You remember ordering pizza and starting a toss-the-pizza-topping-and-catch-with-your-mouth game with Ben and Jack that resulted in punch-drunk laughter and grease splotches everywhere; you think you saw David smirk once or twice. You remember heaping ice-berg scoops of ice cream and flooding them with chocolate sauce and mountains of cool whip that the boys had to climb until they reached Peak Sugar High that you regretted later; you think David licked the ice cream scooper.

So late that night, after you had scrubbed the pizza grease off Jack and fished for Star Wars creatures in a bubble bath, after you had unstacked Mount Pillowmanjaro and folded the blankets, after you had tucked the boys in bed and heard their heavy breathing, after you had swept up the crumbs and picked up the one pepperoni straggler hiding under the couch cushion, after you had double-checked every light switch was off and the front door was locked, you allowed yourself to lock one final door.

In the solitude of the bathroom, you let yourself weep tears of fear.

Miles had always claimed you were too sensitive—you cried at everything, he said, broke down if he merely looked at you the wrong way. Since you finally went head-to-head with him and went through with the divorce, you had commanded yourself not to cry. Not even in the solitude of your bedroom, not even when you drove alone to and from work, not even when you showered and the water would conceal it—no tear was permitted to fall from Molly Griffith's eyes. It wasn't you trying to prove to Miles and Ann you were strong; you simply needed to be strong.

But now that the three months were over, all the tears that you had barricaded broke through the sand dunes and flooded like a hurricane. You clutched the sink, doubled over, trying to come up through the rough waves for air; but the air you found was polluted with fear.

What if you had just screwed up? Who were you to raise three boys alone? You never raised yourself! Miles hadn't been your husband—he'd been your father, your caretaker, your only way of perceiving life. And you'd not only stripped yourself of that person, but you stripped away your boys' one and only father. Had you been right to take them from him? Should you have given him supervised visitation rights so they would at least have a father figure in their life? You should have at least let Ann have them. Then Walter would have been there. Look at David—he doesn't even like you! How long before Ben hates you, before Jack hates you? The horror stories you personally witnessed of fatherless children will certainly happen to your boys. Because you can't raise them, Molly. Like Miles always said, you're nobody, you're nothing, you're useless without him.

When the hurricane ended and the waves receded back to the shoreline, you shakily raised your head and looked in the mirror at the swollen, baggy, red-eyed woman staring back at you. This was the woman who knew nothing about finances, nothing about raising children, and yet was going to tackle being a single mother of three boys? So help you God.

Okay, Molly. Okay. You swiped at those swollen eyes, clicked off the bathroom light, and stepped into the dark hall, shutting the door softly to not disturb the boys.

“Mom.”

You jumped and smacked your hand on the bathroom doorknob. You winced and bit your knuckles, making out David's silhouette from the faint light coming from the kitchen stovetop. “What is it, hon?”

A pause. The floorboard creaked as he shifted. You heard him breathing. Something had to be wrong. David never came to you in the middle of the night. You reached for the light switch.

“Dav—”

He crashed into you. You stumbled back, catching yourself on the wall. What the—Hold on. His arms wrapped around your waist, his face buried into your neck, his breath came hard and fast. You didn't remember the last time he hugged you, you didn't recall the last time he even reached for your hand, but neither of that stopped you from remembering how it was done.

You held him close and rested your chin atop his head, though you had to arch your neck to do it. Funny, you hadn't realized how fast he'd grown; you hadn't realized how much you missed this either. If only he would know why you made your decisions; if only he would understand that a thousand apologies would never describe how truly sorry you were and that you know you failed him; and if only he would understand that the decisions you made were your one chance to make up for your failure. You knew that wasn't much, and he could be angry with you for the rest of your life; you didn't care. You just wanted him to know that you were trying.

Which is why you hugged him a little bit tighter and buried your face in his hair and whispered, "David. I love you."

To your surprise, he hugged you a little tighter. To your surprise, his hands dug a little harder in your shirt. To your surprise, he whispered back, "I love you too."

You'd thought all your tears had been released in the bathroom; apparently, the salt water hadn't yet retreated to the sea. You blinked them away as you smiled and stepped back, lifting David so you'd see his face. You chuckled shakily, ruffling his hair. "Yeah?"

In the faint light, you saw him smirk, and though there were no tears, you thought you heard some emotion in his voice as he said, "Yeah." You pulled him back towards you and he didn't resist. He rested his head on your shoulder, and you rested your head atop his, allowing one more tear to trickle down your cheek.

CUT BACK TO interior of Molly's bedroom.

3:58 A.M. . . . 3:59 A.M.

You watch the time flip again and roll onto your side. The tears must've been real and not just memories because your cheeks are damp and there's salt in your mouth. You swipe at your eyes yet again. You had failed David as a teen, your memory reminded you. And he himself had reminded you of it tonight, bringing up Miles, bringing up your mental instability, bringing up the fact that, once again, you were too late: just as a man breaking your son's skull had to wake you up for a divorce, so too does a man finding a school for your son wake you up to the fact that you're failing your son. Jack. The very boy you resolved would be your redemption, the one son you would finally protect, the one son that you wouldn't let anything happen to him.

Wouldn't let anything happen to him. Ben and David said tonight that was the problem. Something has to happen to Jack, they said.

No. They are wrong. Your eyes burn with fresh tears as the resolution grows in your bosom. Something doesn't have to happen to Jack. That's what happened to David and Ben, that's what happened to Jack before you took him from public school: something happened to them. Something does not have to happen to Jack.

You have to happen.

And you resolve right then and there to take back the wheel from Ben and David and steer the ship back to the shore. For it is your ship, after all. You are its captain. Always.

You yourself will put Jack in school.

Four

The Story of Mama

Chapter Summary: We return to the Dawes family and learn more about their family dynamics. The chapter begins with Mac returning home from work on the construction site, alluding to the reader that he is Ben's boss, in time for a small celebration with his parents, spinster sister, and daughters for his youngest daughter Summer's seventh birthday. The reader is also informed that the oldest daughter June is a kindergarten teacher at Elizabeth Community Academy (where Jack was recently enrolled), and Summer will begin her first year of elementary school there next month. The focus of the chapter, however, is on the event following the celebration when the immediate Daws family members are alone.

In this chapter, Mac puts Summer to bed and tells her "The Story of Mama," which became an annual tradition since her second birthday. This "story" is the one he composed of his late wife Laura based on notes that she wrote when pregnant with Summer. The reader learns that Laura was diagnosed with breast cancer while pregnant with Summer. In Mac's "story," the readers not only learn more about Mac and Laura's somewhat unorthodox and free-spirited personalities and tight-knit marriage, but they also glimpse more of the girls' character arcs: June and May's struggle to be young women without the guidance of their mother while also being surrogate mothers and sisters to Summer, and April's internal conflict as she wrestles with both grief for her mother and the mental battles of being a neurodivergent teenager. The idea is for the reader to see the parallel personalities and struggles with April and Jack.

Five

Jack Fell Down and Broke His Crown . . .

SCENE OPENS in the Griffith kitchen. Early morning light shines through the windows and warms the countertops. The microwave clock reads 7:14.

Molly stands at the stovetop flipping an omelet onto a bagel slice. Ben's at the coffee pot pouring coffee in his thermos. David hustles into the kitchen, shrugging his briefcase strap over his shoulder.

Molly: Jack up yet?

Ben: Haven't seen him.

David grabs a to-go cup of coffee and a tinfoil-wrapped bagel sandwich off the center island.

David: Must be nice to sleep in on a weekday morning.

Ben yawns, shaking his head as if to shake himself awake and screws on the thermos top.

Ben: Tell me about it.

David: School mornings gonna be rough if he doesn't start getting up.

Molly glances sharply at him.

Molly: David.

David: All right, I'm out.

Molly: Wait, wait, your lunch.

David: What? Oh.

She hurries with the lunch-box-sized cooler bag only to whip back around and rush to the freezer.

Molly: Oh, I forgot the ice pack.

David: Don't worry about it, Mom—Mom. *Ben smirks as he passes you on his way to the foyer to grab his work boots. You sigh and scratch your neck. You swear one of these days you'll get over being Mr. Budget and just grab your own lunch. But you have that new car payment since the used one you pinched-pennies to buy as a teen finally gave out. And you just bought a new washer for Mom since the other one flooded. And you're trying to catch up on your half of the house payment since you were out*

of a job for three months and Ben had to cover it for a while. Which you hated. So yeah, you can stomach Mom's sandwiches and her delaying you for a good while.

She shoves the icepack in the bag and quickly zips it up before rushing back to you and slinging the strap over your head. You notice she avoids your eye contact.

Molly: There. Okay.

Still won't look you in the eye even though you make a point to look directly in hers. Obviously, still perturbed about how you treated Jack that night. Typical of a woman. Holding grudges like that. Making sure the man knows the grudge is still there until she's not angry anymore. So you've heard anyways. Not as if you'd know. Only woman in your life has been Mom. For various reasons.

One of them being that she can't make decisions. Look at her now, fussing with your shirt collar for some reason. Is she irritated with you or not? Pick a side, woman. At least then you'd know how to read her body language. Course, you shouldn't let her indecisiveness bug you. You're used to it. It's why you pretty much make all the decisions for her. Started your graduate year of high school when you finally landed your first full-time job driving for FedEx. Ended up delivering little brothers to school 'bout as many times as you did packages since Mom's inability to get out of bed manifested that year for some reason. She also had a hard time making payments that year. You picked up that slack too. Someone had to start making hard and fast decisions. And Mom never objected.

You gotta admit, though, making the decisions for you mother can be damn well aggravating when trying to handle the kid, aka Jack, your better way. Nine times out of ten, you're always the bad guy. Like now.

You arch an eyebrow as she smooths your collar.

David: You okay?

FOCUS ON Molly. You lower yourself from your tiptoes after adjusting his polo collar which got ruffled when you slung the cooler bag over his neck. He's the shortest of your two oldest, standing a good head taller than you at exactly six feet on a good day and wearing shoes. Your boys were built for basketball, you've always said, hence the high school obsession of it back in the day.

You swallow as you fixate on the fabric so David won't get a good look at your eyes because, no, you're not okay. You're scared. You're scared of putting Jack back in school, scared it will break his trust in you, scared you'll mess up again on the one son you vowed you wouldn't mess up with. Worse, David and Ben know you're scared, and you're sure David believes you're overreacting as usual, wanting to shelter Jack all the time. You've tried to act normal, tried to show that you're the strong, capable mother even though they see right through your facade. Because you're not, are you? You had to wait for them to tell you to put Jack in school. You're acting strong but are two steps behind. As David had said not so long ago: Little late for that now, isn't it?

You pat his shoulder and quickly withdraw your hand.

Molly: Yeah, I'm good.

David: You sure?

Molly: Yes.

FOCUS ON David as he adjusts the cooler strap over his other shoulder. Yeah huh. All right, probably not irritated then. Just overly concerned for Jack. Per usual.

David: Okay. All right, see you tonight. You kiss her cheek to show no hard feelings. No reaction. Okay, she is irritated. Once again, you're the bad guy making the tough decisions. Tough luck, she'll get over it.

David: See ya, Ben.

Ben nods as you pass him in the foyer.

Ben: Yeah.

Molly: Be careful!

Oh gosh. Still to this day you get that warning.

David: Yeah, Mom, every time.

FOCUS ON Ben as he pulls out a kitchen chair, sits in it, and starts tugging on his boots as the front door shuts behind David.

Ben: What're you doing today?

Mom wraps your breakfast sandwich in tinfoil. She's made you breakfasts and lunches to go for as long as you remember. When you got out of high school and started working for Ray as a house carpenter, she insisted on still doing it. For David too. You've considered, like David, biting the bullet and just add grabbing a bite out to your tight budget. That way, she wouldn't have the extra work—that was the whole reason you and David worked your butts off to get the finances just right after purchasing this house so she could stay home with Jack; she'd worked enough keeping y'all's heads above water as a single mom. Now that you and David at least got y'all treading the water, maybe you could work meals into the budget. But then again, she likes it; it gives her something to do. And she's going to need something to do when Jack's gone.

She fiddles with the tinfoil though it's already wrapped as if looking for something to keep her hands busy.

Molly: Figured I run Jack out and get the clothes his school wants for their uniform code. I also want to replace his backpack and pencil case and those things. He hasn't used them since he was a kid and they're childish. Want him to pick out something he likes, something he likes the way it feels, you know. Since he's sensitive to those things.

Ben: That's good, Mom. *You smile at her, trying to signal that it will all be okay.*

Mom forces a small smile and pushes the wrapped sandwich across the counter towards you.

Molly: Trying to make it a little fun. *She glances at the steps.* He should be up now.

Ben: He's probably just putzing around. *You stomp to get those fourteen-and-a-half wide feet of yours shoved in the boots.*

Mom smirks and shakes her head as the kitchen cabinets rattle a little. She grabs a pad of paper and pen from the center island and begins writing. Probably one of her many lists. She's always been an extremely organized, on-the-dot-punctual woman.

Molly: Need me to get you anything while we're out?

Ben: Naw, I'm good.

Molly: Oh, I forgot to ask David. Should I text him?

You smirk. Another quirk of hers: everyone must have what they need or want. You know where that habit came from though so you don't mock it.

Ben: Sure he's fine. So long as you got the fridge stocked with Red Bulls, he won't need a thing. *You kiss her cheek. I'll see you later.*

Molly: All right. Be careful.

You chuckle a little as you gather up the sandwich and thermos and swing your own lunch-bag over your shoulder. She's said it all your life, ever since she dropped you and David off at grade school. David finds it mildly annoying but you find the warning mildly amusing. Yet another habit. Whether it's a good or a bad one depends on your point of view, you suppose.

Ben: Okay. *You pass the stairs and call up them. See ya, Jack!*

No response or the sound of any movement. Really, Jack? He's been moody to you and David for the past, what, two weeks? Making sure you both know he'll do what you want but not without kicking and screaming. First few days of moodiness you found understandable, but this is getting ridiculous.

Mom glances between you and the steps and bites the end of her pen, obviously concerned. You hope Jack will hurry his butt down here and be in a good mood for her; but since they're hunting for school

supplies today, the odds are approximately three thousand, seven hundred and twenty to one, to quote C-3PO. You wink at Mom, trying to rub off as much assurance as you can then lean down and pat Lucy.

Ben: See ya, girl. *You mumble in her ear: Keep an eye on them for me today.*

Lucy barks like she understands the mission and licks your face. At least she's not angry with you.

Ben: All right, Mom, I'm out.

Molly: Don't forget your keys. And don't forget to lock the door behind you!

You stop at the front door and sigh as you flash your keys at her with your free hand.

Ben: Got it, Mom.

She smiles sheepishly.

Molly: Okay, sorry. Get going or you'll be late.

You roll your eyes but can't help but smile as you head out the door.

FOCUS ON Molly as Ben shuts and locks the door behind him. *The house is strangely quiet without Jack up. The ticking of the kitchen clock echoes like it belongs on Big Ben in London, the hum of the AC unit rumbles like a jet engine, and the clicking of your pen sounds like the countdown of a bomb. Without Jack, there's no crazy music blasting, no feet pounding up and down the steps, no loud laughing at anything and everything, no Lucy barking crazily over a tug-of-war game, no you reprimanding him for not wearing a helmet while skateboarding.*

You swallow and stop clicking your pen because it and the clock now begin to hurt your ears. Is this what'll it be like with Jack in school? How will you withstand nine silent hours five days a week? What will you do?

The hamper of dirty laundry sits by the steps. Mostly full of Ben's paint-stained cargo jeans. The boy, excuse you, man, goes through so many pairs a week. You smile slightly. You might as well sort through that and start a load while you wait for Jack. As you hoist the basket on your hip, you call up the steps.

Molly: Jack, you up?

Still nothing. He's probably got his earbuds in, Molly. You know how he zones out when listening to music.

Lucy barks and wags her tail.

You smile at her.

Molly: *You want to help? Come on, girl.*

You round the steps for the washer and dryer on the opposite side. Lucy follows.

CUT TO *interior of Jack's bedroom. Faint morning light creeps through the cracks of the closed blinds, casting the room in a shade of gray. Jack lies on his bed, staring at the blinds. The sheets are twisted and scattered across the mattress. The comforter dangles on the end of the bed, threatening to collapse on the floor at any moment.*

Did you even fall asleep?

You must have. Probably did. You don't feel tired, after all. Not your brain anyways.

It was on double speed all night and slowed down for nothing. Not when the porch lights on the neighboring houses faded, not when the time on your alarm clock switched from p.m. to a.m., not when the black sky brightened to gray, not when you heard Ben open the bathroom door, flip on the faucet, and start playing his wake-up-that-tired-body-and-smell-the-coffee-country music. His music taste is okay.

What were you even thinking about again? No, don't remember. You've had enough of remembering. It's what kept you up all night, even though you don't remember what it was about. But you don't want to. Don't remember—

It's on. Like someone flipped a switch. Like someone pressed the rewind button on an old cassette player, and before you can stop it, the tape plays the recording all over again.

...

Mom dipped the plastic syringe into a bottle. Red fluid flooded the clear tube. The little boy, you, thought you wouldn't like it. You didn't like new stuff. And this new stuff looked funny. It smelled funny too. Like plastic.

She smiled. Okay, open up.

You didn't want to open up. It looked and smelled funny. Looked and smelled funny like plastic. You gripped the countertop you sat on. Tucked your head in your shoulders. You weren't going to budge. You didn't want to open up and taste the medicine that looked funny and smelled like plastic.

Come on, honey, it's not bad. It's good.

You spoke inside the cavern of your shaking shoulders. What does it taste like?

The doctor said it tastes like bananas. You like those. It'll be good. It's good for you. It'll help you with school. Now come on, open up. She tilted your head up like a baby bird and placed the syringe in your mouth. Thick liquid shot onto your tongue. Some of it dribbled out your closed lips and down your chin.

There, you see. Not that bad. She took a napkin and wiped the excess liquid off your chin.

Not that bad, he guessed. It didn't taste like bananas. That was a big lie. You liked bananas and you knew that's not how they tasted. But it didn't taste bad either. Tasted how you'd imagine plastic would taste.

And then that dark feeling came. Dark as in literally dark, like no light at all. It was the scariest thing that happened to you. You couldn't see inside yourself, you couldn't see outside yourself, you couldn't see inside or outside yourself. Looking in the mirror was no good. You didn't know who that boy was. And you didn't know who that boy was because you couldn't see that boy. It was too dark. When the boy wanted to bounce, something inside you would order him to not bounce. And you'd urge that little boy to bounce, to get up, to run because that's what he wanted and he had every right to do it. But then that dark thing would cover you, hide him from the little boy so the little boy couldn't see or hear you begging him to bounce and get up and run. And so the little boy just sat there, feeling this urge but unable to do it because this dark thing reached inside you and rewired your neurons to stop.

And then the dark thing got heavy. Why did it get heavy? Because it was a chain. You couldn't see the chain—it was too dark, remember? —but you felt it, felt the cold iron weigh dropped on your shoulders and pull down your neck even when your teachers said to look at them, even when you shrugged off your backpack and left it in the furthest corner of your room so you wouldn't have to see it. Because the medication may have stopped the bouncing in your chair and the pent-up energy to run around the classroom, but it didn't make you smarter. It didn't rewire your stupid brain so the words looked right. It didn't rewire your stupid brain so you could read basic words. It didn't rewire your stupid brain so you could keep up with everyone else.

And that's when It came.

Because there came an orange one.

You didn't want to take another one. You didn't like the way the red one tasted now. It didn't taste like bananas and it didn't taste like plastic. It just tasted bad. You didn't want to take two bad things.

She smiled. The doctor said you have to take another one, remember? It'll help you feel better at school. It'll help you not feel so anxious.

I don't want it.

Honey, it's good for you. You have to take it.

What does it taste like?

It's gonna taste like ginger ale. She whisked the orange something in a cup of ginger ale. You like that.

But it didn't look like ginger ale. It looked murky. Like a dirty, sandy tidal pool.

But you opened up like a baby bird again, and she squirted in the red liquid. And you coughed and wiped your mouth because it tasted bad, and then you chugged the tidal-pool ginger ale to get the bad taste out of your mouth because you liked ginger ale. And you coughed and asked for water and wiped your mouth and tried not to gag because the orange tasted worse than the red. It didn't taste like ginger ale at all. What did those doctors know about taste? Didn't they ever eat?

It came.

Literally. First, the dark thing overshadowed you like Darth Vader's Imperial Star Destroyer overtaking Princess Leia's consular ship, hiding you from everyone's view, leaving you alone in the back of the class where no one, not even your teacher, could find you. At first you didn't mind it. You liked it. No one seeing you meant no one would chase you down the halls, no one would throw paper balls at you with notes written on them that you couldn't read anyway—except stupid, you learned how to read that word fast—no one would lick suckers and stick them in your hair and laugh when you couldn't take them out, or worse, when you could take them out and hot tears would prick your eyes because it hurt to pull them out.

But It, this Nexu that escaped the Petranaki arena and snuck into your body, didn't like that you liked being alone. So, It got mad. It got so mad that it invaded your stomach like the Stormtroopers invading Princess Leia's ship and tore at your insides. You didn't want to eat after that. Eating made It angry. And when It got angry, it hurt. So, you didn't eat. But Mom would tell you to eat, and you would get hungry after a while so you would have to eat. But then It raged, stomped Its heavy feet until the walls of your shaking stomach collapsed, grabbed chunks of gut and ripped them off like wallpaper, threw your intestines all over your belly's floor until there was nothing left inside your stomach. That was your punishment for disobeying: It made you throw up over and over.

And then there came the pink one.

You didn't want to take a third one. You didn't like the way the orange ginger-ale tasted because it tasted awful, nothing like ginger-ale but everything like tidal pool water. You'd never like ginger-ale ever

again. You now hated the way the red one tasted. It tasted disgusting. You didn't want to take three disgusting things.

She smiled. The doctor gave us a new one, remember? This'll help you not get sick.

I don't want it. I don't want another one.

I know, honey, but you need it. It's going to help you. It's good for you.

What does it taste like?

Supposed to taste like bubblegum. Yum, right? Now, come on, take this for me please.

So once again you opened up like a baby bird, and once again she squirted in the red liquid. And you gagged because it tasted so bad, a far cry from bananas, but this time you didn't stop and drink water because you had gotten used to it, so you immediately opened up your mouth again and chugged the orange ginger-ale. And you forced back another gag and opened up again because, please, let's get this over with, and squirt went the pink liquid. And this time, you coughed and drank water and wiped your mouth and tried not to gag because the pink tasted even worse than the orange tidal water. It didn't taste like bubblegum at all. It tasted like something to make you sick, which was funny because the doctor said this was to not make you sick.

...

You curl into the armadillo ball. You lost your blanket sometime in the night. You're cold but you don't want to move and grab the covers. You want safety. You want a shield. You want a forcefield. You want anything, anything that will encompass you harder and wider than this armadillo ball you make with its weak shell because you need protection from the class, you need protection from the teachers, you need protection from It—

Stop. Stop being stupid, Jack. You got to stop. You got to stop thinking about these things because even though you can taste the prescriptions on your tongue, they're not really in your mouth, they're only in your brain, and you know this, know they're not real, know they're just memories, but gosh, do they taste bad, and gosh, does it scare you that you can taste them, and gosh, does it remind you of—No, don't think about that again! Don't—

But your memory plays its funky beat, jacking up this AC unit in your body and blasting shivers throughout you so you curl yourself even tighter to keep warm and stop the shaking. Stop, stop, stop—

No way, Jose, your brain mocks. Let's jack it up, Jack. Let's check out all your memories like that Black Eyed Peas song Mom said she used to listen on the radio—she's got a strange sense of music—“Check it out, check it out, one, two-two-two-” because heck no, we aren't going to stop for you, and we'll just laugh 'cause “don't you know, pump it up, you got to pump it up and up and up—”

“Huh, huh, hahh! Pump it!”

...

The little boy, you, swallowed. You fussed with the page, and it stuck to your sweaty thumbs. Your throat hurt from holding back tears, your body hurt from the stares of the class, your brain hurt from the burning eyes of the teacher looming over you.

The teacher towered above you like Darth Maul towering above Obi-Wan, daring you to try and make a move. Do it again. Think.

You were thinking. You tried to think what the words said. Why did the teacher always ask you? She knew you didn't know the answer. She knew you didn't speak. The other kids did but she didn't ask them. Why you? Why you who were stupid? So the class could write more notes with the word stupid scrawled on them?

Read it.

A tear snuck down your cheek. You were trying. Please, teacher, you were trying.

You tried to wriggle your jaw. C-c-cat—That was the word, right? What was the word?

Come on, think.

You tried to think. You tried to think of what those letters even were because you couldn't see them right. It could be a b, it could be a d, it could be an l, it could be an i, it could be ... it could be ... Please, please, teacher, you were trying.

Read it.

Wriggle the jaw. C-cat—What even was the word?

Teacher whirled and grabbed the textbook off her desk.

Think! BAM!

Face smacked the smooth pages of the book. Nose vibrated. Back of head rang. Skull pushed out a hard knot. Eyes burned from hot tears of pain and humiliation. Words on the paper laughed in your face.

It plays in your head like a broken record. Think! BAM! Think! BAM! Think! BAM! Think!

...

Oh, you're thinking all right. You're thinking aren't you, Jack?

Here goes your heart. "Pump it! Louder! Pump it! Louder!" No, not now. This can't be happening now. The day hasn't even started and already panic attacks you. You squeeze your legs even harder in your armadillo ball, pressing your forehead against your knees. Come on, calm down. Calm down, please, calm down. But your heart keeps singing "pump up the volume," and your lungs latch onto the beat, and now your chest hurts, and now you're trying to breathe, and now would your brain shut off for five seconds so you can focus on telling your heart and lungs to stop and not listen to your brain that tries to get them to dance?

But your brain wants to keep dancing, wants to egg on your heart and lungs. "Pump up the volume, pump up the volume, pump up the volume, dance, dance!"

'Cause you remember those taunts, right? No, you don't want to remember. You want to stop remembering. Well, you're going to remember. No, stop, leave me alone—Remember, Jack? Remember, stupid? No. Yeah, you remember.

Stupid. No. Yeah, you remember it, stupid.

Stupid.

...

Stupid. That was the one word you could actually read, could actually pronounce, could even actually write. It made sure you could.

That was its next move. Making you throw up didn't give it enough satisfaction; it was a starving Nexu, after all, who fed on your insides. And to fully eat your flesh, cook it just right, it had to get you out from hiding beneath Teacher's desk or in a locker. You had to go public. People had to know you as stupid. They had to teach you how to read, spell, and write it.

The only time you didn't hide was recess, your outside time, your free time, your finally-can-move-your-arms-and-legs-time and not-have-any-one-tell-you-to-be-still-time. You could spin around. You could run.

So It made sure you spun and ran.

You were a fast runner, always had been. Not even long-legged big brother Ben could keep up with you. You had speed, endurance, energy. The problem was you were a short and scrawny twelve year old; the thirteen and fourteen year olds were tall and thick. The problem was you never wanted to take off your backpack (only if you hid) because it acted like an extra protective shell, but it was heavy and slowed you down; the teenagers caught up quick. The problem was you always wore your hoodie because it gave you something to cover your head so sticky suckers couldn't get in your hair; the teenagers had arms long enough to jerk it and your heavy backpack.

Once snagged, once It laughed as the thick teenagers dragged you by your backpack or hoodie across the playground and tossed onto the merry-go-round, It wound up Its favorite song.

First, you were wildly spun. The world passed by you in a blur, and you shut your eyes tight and clung onto the railing for dear life because every kid knew that if you let go, you'd go flying and break something. You never flew though because Mom always said you were a hard clinger when she left you for work and she was never wrong, so you squeezed that metal railing until your hands hurt and tried not to throw up as you were spun faster and faster, and the teens laughed harder and harder.

Then It finished winding up Its music box, Its Jack-in-the-Box of all things, and let Its favorite song play. "Jack and Jill went up the hill ..."

The teens jerked you from the merry-go-round. You couldn't stand up, you were so dizzy and so sick, and they'd hold you up as they sang along with It: "Jack and Jill went up the hill—"

Dunked on your head was the freezing water from the bottles that sat in the fridge too long. You gasped as the cold shocked you— "To fetch a pail of water. Jack fell down"—Bam! You were shoved into the dirt, cold water dripping down your spine— "And broke his crown"—Crunch went the water bottles— "And Jill came tumbling after!" A volley of empty water bottles barraged your head, the hard plastic tops dinging your skull.

That's when the playground supervisor would run up, blowing her whistle, and the teens would scatter and disappear as good as Jawas, and It would put away the music box. She'd help you up and ask if you were okay and set you on a bench, and you'd nod just to get her to leave you alone because she always showed up too late and never caught the teens because they were always different teens, and it seemed like no one told your mom and you didn't either because you couldn't speak anyways, so why even take the time to tell the supervisor you were really not okay?

...

The water drip, drip, drips from your hair, down your neck, and trickles down your spine. No, that's not water. It's not real, you idiot! Can't you feel your mattress under you? But is your mattress wet and cold? You're gasping from the shock of freezing water—no, that's because your lungs and chest didn't listen to you and joined your heart rate in its too-fast dancing, so now your heart plays a hard drum beat in your ears and your lungs rattle the maracas, and please, can we just stop this crazy band and breathe? No amount of armadillo squeezing helps. Your brain won't stop encouraging the insane band, won't stop encouraging the memory spectators to come on in and watch, won't stop your heart from overpowering your commands with its blaring beating because it wants to keep pumping though you don't need the pumping, like it's playing drums for that 70s song Mom showed you.

“Pump it up when you don't really need it. Pump it up until you can feel it.”

You try to tell everything to stop. But you can't talk. Your voice has been taken from you. You can't talk.

...

You couldn't talk because It stole your voice. At first, you didn't care to talk. Talking meant you said a wrong answer so Teacher would mock you. Talking meant the class heard how stupid you were so they could bully you later. Talking meant you stuttered when you read so the teacher would mock you and the class could bully you later.

It decided you shouldn't speak. Ever. No matter who spoke to you, no matter if you wanted to answer. One night when It was especially angry with you for eating, It attacked you, slashed into your throat with its vicious claws and ripped out your voice box with a hideous screech that showed Its bloody, Nexu teeth. You screamed for It to put it back. It didn't hear you because you couldn't scream. It had your voice box after all.

Even when you wanted to answer teachers so they would stop staring at you, you couldn't, no matter how hard you tried. Your lips moved all right, most of the time anyway, but no sound came out. That's why recess was taken from you, and you had to sit in the corner (at least you weren't getting bullied) because you had acted smart to your teachers (which was impossible because weren't you stupid?). That's why doctors kept poking your ears with tubes and stabbing your mouth with sticks and hitting your knees with hammers and pressing your bare chest with cold metal circles and asking why would a big, brave boy like you not want to talk and telling you it's okay you didn't want to talk because they would give you some medicine to help you talk again, and won't that be fun big, brave boy, Jack? That's why Mom kept finding new colors for you to swallow and asking you to open up like a good little bird because she wanted to hear your voice again. That's why Teacher smashed your head with a book, and Mom pulled you out of school and begged you to please, please talk to her.

It sat in the corner and chuckled, stroking your voice box. Because It knew that was the worst part for you: not talking to Mom.

You sat at the supper table staring at the plate Mom made for you and trying your best not to drool all over the place because, oh, you were so hungry, but oh, did It get oh so mad when you ate.

Mom cleared her throat. Aren't you hungry, Jack?

Of course you were hungry. You were starving. But you couldn't eat. And you couldn't tell her.

Honey, why aren't you eating?

David took a bite. Jack, Mom asked you a question.

Ben took a bite. It's good, Jack.

You know Mom asked you a question. You know it's good. Your lips trembled. You wanted to answer. You wanted to eat.

Honey, talk to me.

Jack, Mom's talking to you.

Come on, Jack, it's good.

Then your chin trembled with your lips. You wanted to answer. You knew she was talking to you. You knew it was good. You tasted salt on your tongue, the only thing you could taste. You drew back deeper into your hoodie, burrowed your trembling chin into your shaking chest. You couldn't cry in front of David and Ben because big boys didn't cry. But you weren't a big boy because you wanted to cry and talk to Mom and tell her everything that scared you at school, tell her about how It attacked you, tell her you didn't like ginger-ale anymore. But you couldn't.

Honey, please talk to me.

David nudged your shoulder. Jack, answer Mom.

Don't make me eat all this by myself, bud.

You wanted to talk to her. You wanted to answer. You didn't want Ben to eat by himself.

You tried to talk. You opened your trembling lips attached to your trembling chin, but all that came out was some weird squawk like the stupid baby bird you were. More salt fell on your tongue and your cheeks were wet, so you covered your eyes with your fists because big boys didn't cry, not in front of David and Ben.

Honey, it's okay.

Her arms pulled you in, and you wrapped your arms and legs around her like a spider-monkey and clung tight because you were always a good clinger, Mom said, and she was never wrong. Her lilac-detergent-scented shirt filled your face, soaking up the snot and tears.

Honey, tell me what's wrong.

We can't help, pal, if you won't—

Jack, come on, bud, talk to—

Stop it, boys. Shh, it's okay, honey, just talk to Mommy. Tell me what's wrong.

You didn't have your voice box, that's what was wrong. Because It had it. And It wouldn't let you eat, and It was going to play Its music box tomorrow at school, and It was going to attack you tonight, so please, help me, Mommy!

Of course, you didn't say any of that. You couldn't. You just clung to her and breathed in her lilac-detergent shirt and hoped she'd somehow hear and understand you with your beating heart pressed against hers. You breathed in her lilac-detergent shirt . . .

. . .

Your face presses deeper in the mattress. You already can't breathe, so lift up your face, idiot, but your neck is so, so heavy like there's a chain around it. A chain around it. The dark thing. Is it back? Course not, you—Because the dark thing comes before It. Stop, you're—If the dark thing is here, It is on the way—It isn't real! —Course It is real. Just like the bullying was real.

People say kids aren't cruel, that they're understanding and accepting, but those kids could just stare at you and make you feel like you were a disease. And people say high schoolers are cruel. You know that for a fact. Your brothers think you're too young to remember Mom taking you to pick up Ben and David, and one of them would have a bloody nose, a swollen cheek, a bruised stomach. And David and Ben are fighters. You're not. You're a runner, a hider, a close-your-eyes-and-hope-they-won't-find-you kid.

So what's gonna happen when you get there, huh? What will the high schoolers do? If the kids and young teens were cruel, what do you expect the full-blown teenagers will do to you? Once it gets out that you're backwards and slow because it will get out that you're backwards and slow because David and Ben said they were going to tell—

Holy crap, Ben and David said they would tell your teachers about your mentality. What're they thinking? Do they want it to get out? Of course they do because it's all part of your stupid "character development." They think that you're overreacting or making it up or don't want to learn. Or they think that the taunts and the laughs and the jokes and the stares are good because it'll get you out more, it'll expose you to "the real world" which David says is tough, so yeah, put you in that tough place to show you just how hard it is so you'll stop acting like a kid so you'll grow up so—

Your stomach twists. Gosh, you haven't even eaten and you already feel like throwing up. Yeah, that's what happens when It—Shut up. This is ridiculous. Stop, stop it, brain. Come on, take a deep breath only to have it catch on a chest bone. You're not a kid. Try to get everything calmed down.

But your brain won't stop. It blasts the beat even louder so your heart and lungs have something harder to move to, but now your stomach is way behind and can't keep up with the pace so it's getting sick. "Pump up the jam, pump it up, while your feet are stomping, and the jam is pumping."

Sick. Remember being sick? No, I already did! Stop. Stop taking me back. Stop going in circles. Stop—

Uh-huh. Remember that pink, bubblegum liquid that actually tasted like something made to make you sick, which was funny because they gave it to you to make you stop getting sick? And remember how you got sick because the orange tidal pool that was supposed to taste like ginger-ale and now you hate ginger-ale made you get sick? And remember how you had to take the orange tidal pool ginger-ale because the red one made you anxious? And remember how the red one that actually tasted more like plastic than bananas was supposed to help you fit in at school because you were stupid? And remember how the red and the orange and the pink all came together to make a sick rainbow where at the end sat It with Its big pot ready to take your voice box? That funky rainbow is about to shine again.

Your hands shake. Cool it, Jack, cool it! Your ball is not tight enough to stop this. You grip the pillowcase. It's damp. Have you been sweating? No, it's the water from the bottles—

No, I don't want to think about that again. You're going to think about it again. No, leave me alone! You're going to think about it again. No, I won't! Yeah, you will.

'Cause you know you're still not going to fit in. You know you're still going to have anxiety. You have it right now, and you haven't even gotten out of bed. Look at you. You've fallen apart. You'll break there. And you'll have to take those reds and oranges and pinks again, only they'll be stronger because you're

older, and because they'll be stronger, the dark place will be stronger, and because the dark place will be stronger, it will be stronger. And you'll go back where you were, only this time, there'll be no breaking free from its claws because Mom can't help you because Mom can't teach you so Mom won't pull you out so David and Ben will keep you in school until you break, and you will break because you're backwards, and everyone will know you're backwards because David and Ben will tell and—

You can't breathe. You can't breathe.

CUT TO Molly getting to the head of the steps and walking to Jack's room. His door's still closed. Odd. The whole morning's odd. He's usually up before you, bouncing all over the place with Lucy. You've already sorted the laundry and started a load, cleaned up the kitchen from the boys' breakfast, dusted a few lampshades you noticed had some uncomfortable flecks of dust on the edges, and let Lucy out to do her business. He shouldn't still be in his room. His door should at least be open.

His alarm clock buzzes. You rap on his bedroom door.

Molly: Jack, you up?

No response. But the door gives a little.

You push the door open. It only takes a moment for you to grasp the situation: the still closed blinds, the alarm clock buzzing, buzzing, buzzing, the messed up and tousled bed, the comforter piled on the floor, Jack curled into a tight ball facing the wall. In two strides, you're at his side. You smack the alarm off and sit on the edge of the bed, gently rolling him towards you.

Molly: Jack? You okay, honey?

He's cold to the touch, but his hair's damp with sweat. Is he sick? You rest your palm against his forehead then press your lips against his brow. No, no fever.

Molly, look at him. He's staring out at space, he hasn't even acknowledged you're here. He's trembling. He's practically gasping for air. He's clutching his pillowcase for dear life like it's a life raft on a stormy ocean. You've seen this before in him: A panic attack. This early? What's going on?

You brush his damp hair from his forehead, tilt his head so he looks at you.

Molly: Honey, what's going on? What's wrong?

FOCUS ON Jack. Mom. When did she get here? It doesn't matter. Thank God she's here. Just you and her. No David, no Ben, nobody to influence her. You've got to tell her. You couldn't as a kid. Do it now. You've got to make her understand.

But you can't breathe. Your throat seizes up, you can't get any air, can't get the words to come out right. You gasp for a breath. You sound like you're squawking just like that baby bird.

Jack: Please, don't—don't—

FOCUS ON Molly. *What's got him so worked up? Surely it can't be the shopping day. He was fine with the idea last night before you went to bed last night, right? Well, he was far from over-the-moon about getting school supplies but didn't seem scared about it. What happened during the night that changed him so quickly? You manage to wrest one of his vise-like hands from the pillowcase and take it in yours, giving it a gentle squeeze. Physical touch usually calms him, draws him back.*

Molly: Don't what?

FOCUS ON Jack as he struggles to move his lips. *Don't send you back to that dark place. Don't send you back to the reds and oranges and pinks where It awaits. Don't send you there again. Not there. Anywhere but there. Please, Mom, understand. Please, Mom, don't do it.*

But you can't get the words out. You can't get them to squeeze through your blocked throat. And the ones that do wriggle through don't sound right.

Jack: Please don't make me go back. I can't go back. I can't—*Your voice breaks. You can't breathe. You can't get air.*

That's what it is. School. It's breaking him already.

Molly: Oh, honey. Shh, come here. *You pull him to you, resting his head in your lap, wrapping your arms about him, gently rocking him like you've done since he was a toddler. Breathe. Breathe, it's okay.*

FOCUS ON Jack as he clutches her shirt. *You've always been a good clinger. You latch on to Mom now for dear life because she's the lifeboat in this storm of anxiety that tosses you about in its awful waves. Her arms are firm, holding you fast so the ocean won't suck you back, but you're still drowning, you still can't breathe.*

You press him closer as he grips you tighter. You rub his back, firing signals of comfort down his spine, warding off the fear.

Molly: Come on, deep breaths. Deep breaths. *You inhale deeply then slowly exhale, encouraging him to mimic you like you did back in the day, a tip the doctors gave you on how to calm him down.*

You feel Mom's stomach expand and deflate against your head as she breathes. Come on, Jack, you can do this. It isn't hard. So you inhale as you feel her inhale and don't stop inhaling even though it hurts until you feel her exhale, and then you exhale and make yourself think about how you can time your breath with Mom's. Focus on that. Match Mom's breath.

You smile as he latches on to your pace. You ease your rocking to a gentle lull.

Molly: Good, that's it. Do it again. Come on. You take a deep breath.

And you two breathe in and out, in and out, like the tide lapping against the shore. In and out, in and out, like the waves taking and leaving shells on the sand. In and out, in and out.

Stillness.

FOCUS ON *Jack as his stiff fingers ease up on Molly's shirt. It's over. The attack on your lungs, the attack on your heart, the attack on your brain, it's ceased. The storm of anxiety with its crashing waves calms as Mom's hands speak, "peace, be still," and now they gently rock as you breathe in and out, in and out. No longer tossed by your thoughts, you just drift in this calm ocean of silence. And you don't want to think again. Just want to be still. Here. In Mom's soft, lilac-detergent shirt. In her lap. In your bed. In your room. In this day. Nowhere else. No more past.*

FOCUS ON *Molly as she stops rocking when Jack's breathing returns to a normal pace. His grip's slackened. He's not fighting anymore. Good. Now to ease him so the panic doesn't arise again today, so the school supplies won't remind him of fear but of something new, something he can accept.*

Something you can accept.

You stroke his back.

Molly: You understand that I can't teach you anymore. So, you have to go back.

Now his grip on your shirt retightens. His spine goes rigid beneath your palm. You bend over and press your forehead on the top of his hair, holding him closer. No, no, not again, Jack. Come on.

Molly: But this'll be different.

Jack: It won't.

Molly: It will. Stop telling yourself it won't. This is a new school. A nicer school.

Bitterness rises in his throat.

Jack: That's David and Ben talking.

You swallow. Yes, that's David and Ben talking. That's their words in your mouth, isn't it? Because deep down, do you really know if it's a "nicer school?" Can you truly tell your son that, beyond a shadow of a doubt, hand on the Bible, so help you God, that you know this school will treat him right, will respect him, will help him since you no longer can?

No. But you can't tell him that, can you? What choice do you have? You can't teach him. You're not smart enough. You never were, you just madly searched the internet for four years. But you've never shown him your weakness, never showed him your fear. You did that to Ben and David, and you refused to do it with Jack. And you didn't. He never doubted your knowledge, never questioned your resolve, which is why even now he believes you can do it. You must remain strong for him now. You must make him believe again. What choice do you have?

You stop rubbing his back and just press your hand against him, press a false fortitude in the hopes of encouraging a true strength within him that you don't possess.

Molly: Honey, you have to finish your education. There's no way around this. We chose a school that will be good. It'll be much better than what you remember.

FOCUS ON Jack. *You scrunch her shirt even harder so that your nails dig your palms through the fabric. She means David and Ben chose the school. They just forced her to agree.*

You have to tell her. You've tried. You've tried telling Ben and David, but for some reason, you can't ever explain it to them. What you say is not what it sounded like in your head, not what you practiced over and over so you could finally make them understand what you've been trying to say. You tried telling Mom, but when you finally get your tongue to actually use the words that are in your brain, David or Ben are always there to influence her, to get her to not listen to you.

You pull back from her and stare up into her face. Listen, Mom. Please. Understand me, Mom. Translate this. Please.

Jack: Mom—*Your throat scratches. You swallow—I don't want to go back to where I was. I don't want to go back to that.*

FOCUS ON Molly. *Wheels of anxiety roll in Jack's irises again. And you know. You know the "where" and the "that" are the mental traps that ensnared his formative years, that were set for him by the medications designed to free him, that were forged by doctors and teachers you trusted because you had no one else to trust, and hell, no, he's not going back. You swear her life on it.*

You lean forward, stare directly in his eyes.

Molly: You won't, Jack. That's not happening again.

Jack: It will.

And in those eyes, you see the little boy sitting on the countertop, staring up at you, believing in you, trusting you for freedom and not traps. You'll do it right this time. No more traps. Not again, Jack.

Molly: No, it won't because I won't let it.

You wrap his quivering frame in your arms, and he hugs your neck, squeezing you close. Fear still vibrates off his body. You kiss his cheek. Come on, Jack. It's okay. It won't happen.

FOCUS ON Jack as he clings to Molly's neck. She always said you were a good clinger, and she is always right. And she says now that she won't let it happen again. But she can't, can she? Mom can keep the prescriptions away, but she can't stop the mockery, the pressure, your slowness, your anxiety. It'll all come back, and even if she could pull you back out of school like she did before, she couldn't, because David and Ben will keep you there and she'll listen to them, and then the prescriptions will come back because you'll need them to function because you can't get out of school, and Mom won't be able to do anything about it because David and Ben want you in school and that's the only way you'll be able to stay, so swallow back the pinks and the oranges and the reds and, "hello, darkness, my old friend."

Why? Why do they have to do this your brothers' way? Why can't they do this Mom's way? Why can't Mom do it Mom's way? Why can't you do it your way?

You see David crossing his arms, biting his lower lip like he does when he's fed up: You expect to get to college without—

What even for? You never did! And you're—

Yeah, exactly, I never did, Jack, and that's the damn point, all right?

You see Ben scratching his forehead with his ball cap with a sigh: Because we know what's best for you, Jack—No, they don't. How can they? It's your experience, your life. How can they know what they never lived?

Jack: Why can't we do this online like you said?

FOCUS ON Molly as she bites her lip. You've asked yourself the same question. You've thought about it and rethought about it, and then come back to the thought and rethought it again. It would be much easier on Jack. There'd be no peer pressure, no one-on-one communication, no eye contact. You could look over his shoulder the entire time and help him and—

And that's the problem, isn't it? That's the point. He won't always have you over his shoulder. He can't. He has to handle pressure. He has to understand one-on-one communication. He has to have eye contact. He has to have contact in general. Outside of this house. Outside of your sight. Outside of your reach.

You sit up and smooth his damp hair.

Molly: Because you have to be around people again, Jack. You have to learn how to work with people who aren't your family. You can't stay like this.

Jack: That's not what you think.

Molly: It is—

Jack: That's what David and Ben think.

Molly: Jack—

Jack: What do you think, Mom?

You think it's a bad idea. Look at him, Molly. He's already having panic attacks, and he's not even there yet. You haven't even picked out his backpack. So what do you think will happen when you put him in that school? You failed him the first time. You lost him. Will you fail him again? Will you lose him for a second and final time like you lost David and Ben?

He stares at you. He sees your doubt, Molly. Don't do this to him. Snap out of it. Snap him out of it.

You rest a steady hand on his arm.

Molly: I think we don't need to think about this right now. It's still weeks away. Right now, I need you to think about calming yourself down. Let's enjoy our day, hm? It'll be just you and me, like always.

FOCUS ON *Jack as his brow furrows. Enjoy it? What is she talking about? They're getting new school supplies. They're getting a stupid uniform, whatever that is. And if they're getting new school supplies and a stupid uniform, that means you're going. It's like signing your death penalty.*

Molly: We can talk more about this when we're out, okay? Just not right now.

But—okay. You nod. Okay. It'll just be them, like she said. You won't have to worry about David and Ben influencing her, and you won't have to try and crunch the words out before one of them talks and you forget and shut you all down. You'll have time to think about what you want to say, time to explain to Mom so she gets it.

All right, he's calming down. Give him a game plan, Molly.

Molly: Now, I'm going to go walk Lucy. You get yourself ready, and when I come back, we'll eat some breakfast and head out, okay? Sound like a plan? Come on, sit up.

Okay. Okay that sounds good. Your body feels heavy. Mom helps you up, but it seems like weights are tied to your legs as you swing them over the bed. And you're tired. Why are you so tired all of a sudden?

Molly wraps her arm around Jack's skinny frame, and he leans his head on her shoulders. You rub his bony shoulder. Jack's always been small, but remember the sickly boy, Molly? Remember that weak, clammed up shell he became . . . will you bring that back? Will what you think is good prove to be yet another mistake, yet another sin to confess?

No. Remind him of the plan, Molly. Help him keep his mind on these rails and not another track. You set him up and plant your hands on his shoulders.

Molly: I want you ready by the time I get back. Then we'll eat and go, okay?

FOCUS ON Jack as he fists his red eyes. That means clothes, shoes, socks, teeth-brushed, bed made, hair combed. Okay, you can do that.

You nod.

Mom kisses your forehead then rises.

Molly: Okay. See you in a few.

Mom leaves your room. And it's not until you hear the front door shut and lock and Lucy's excited barks fade that you finally manage to pull yourself up and drag your heavy legs to your dresser. You crash into the wood, rattling the Lego sets and miscellaneous junk. You plop your elbows on the top and dig at your eyes that suddenly want to shut and sleep after refusing to all night. Come on, Jack, wake up. Pull yourself together.

As you open your drawer, you catch a glimpse of two notifications on your phone. Funny, you didn't hear them. Your phone's never silenced—Mom hates that. You pick up the phone. Texts from Ben and David.

Ben:

Enjoy the time with Mom. Stay positive for her bud.

David:

i need you to have a good attitude for mom pal.

You squeeze the phone, fighting the urge to chunk it across the room. "Have a good attitude" . . . who gave you the attitude to begin with? "Stay positive"—what, about something they wanted and planned and set up for your life without even asking, without even telling you until they swayed Mom so now

you're bound to go because you're trapped between unbending them and persuaded Mom? "I need you to"—yeah, course they do, 'cause they're running this thing and whatever they say goes, not what you say, they don't care, you've tried, they don't listen, they won't listen, because this is what they want so they want you to have a good attitude about a decision they made for your life without even asking and just—

You slam the phone on the dresser and grip your hair. Just—just—

You know what, fine. Fine. Sure, you'll have a good attitude for Mom. You'll stay positive for Mom. But you're doing it because it'll make her happy, not because they told you to. You'll do it for Mom because it'll just be you and her all day and you can talk to her, not because they told you to. You'll do it for Mom. Not for David. Not for Ben. Not for either of them.

Just Mom.

Six

... and Jill Came Tumbling After

Chapter Summary: This chapter returns the readers to the Dawes family house where April house-sits alone as her father and oldest sisters are at work and Summer is staying with their grandparents. The Dawes's family routine has shifted due to both Summer starting school this year and Mac's company expanding, which requires May to work with him part-time as a secretary and leaves April to care for the house while the family is gone; therefore, today is setup as a "test run" for April, preparing her for what she will have to do more frequently in the future (akin to how Jack has a school "test run" himself in the following chapter). The reader learns how April feels pressured to live up to family expectations that she believes she cannot achieve.

Similar to the previous chapter where Jack's narrative overshadowed the majority of the narrative, this chapter will solely be written in April's perspective. Like Jack, she is mentally trapped in a time-loop battle that "freezes her" in place (also known as ADHD paralysis) due to her anxiety and depression. In her thought process, the readers not only become more aware of April's neurodivergent personality and challenges, but also learn more about Laura's cancer treatments that April sometimes had to help with (such as assisting her mother vomiting after chemotherapy sessions) and see how her mother's death has greatly affected her mental health.

Seven

On Waffles and Droid Armies

SCENE OPENS in the Griffith kitchen. Early morning sunlight yawns through the windows. The stovetop clock reads 6:45. Molly stands at the stove and flips a waffle from the iron onto a plate. Ben is at the counter to the side of her, pouring coffee into a mug.

FOCUS ON Ben as he sets the mug beside Molly.

Ben: Here you go.

Molly: Thanks, hon. She looks to the left. Jack! She takes a plate of waffles to the table while you pour coffee into a second mug. Mom looks up at you as she sets the plate on the table.

Molly: Is that your second cup of coffee already? She smirks. Know you're a coffee addict but what'd you do, chug the first one?

You grin as you walk to the table.

Ben: A proud addict. Gonna need all the energy I can take today.

Mom's smirk strains. She forces a chuckle and straightens a napkin which was already pencil-straight to begin with. Perhaps that wasn't the best joke. Sounds like you know the day's gonna be rough.

Which it probably will, though you're trying to stay positive about it. You knew either Mom or Jack or both would bail out (most likely both 'cause Mom'll cave to Jack soon as he's the least bit uncomfortable, David had said), so you and David had agreed that one of you needed to take off work today and oversee the situation, making sure both Mom and Jack stayed clear headed. You volunteered under the guise of having the most sick days stashed up (which is true), but really you knew that mixing matter-of-fact David with anxious Mom and nerve-racked Jack was like mixing vinegar and baking soda. David only asked once if you were up for it and wished you godspeed. Mom never objected once when you told her the idea.

Besides, it's only a half day today, Friday. The private school gives the classes what they call an Orientation Day that's only half the time of a regular weekday so the students can familiarize themselves with their teachers, subjects, schedules, classrooms, etc. Means the day won't be so long for Mom or Jack and that Jack should get adjusted fairly quickly before starting the real deal on Monday. Yeah, stay positive, Ben.

FOCUS ON Jack who shuffles into the kitchen, his right hand gripping his left elbow and nervously glancing around the kitchen.

Ben: Hey.

Oh geez. It's too early for Ben's smile to be this big. And why'd he have to draw the focus on you? You're going to be expected to talk, and talking is almost impossible right now with this stupid polo-shirt collar choking you. It takes everything in you to not jerk and jerk and jerk at it until the buttons snap off and the neck stretches so wide you could almost shrug both shoulders through it. That's the first reason why you grip your elbow—to keep you from clawing at your shirt like the Nexu clawing Padme's top.

To your cringe, Mom puts on this big smile, looking all surprised as if she hasn't seen this outfit before, as if you didn't spend two eternities driving to two Old Navy stores to find this specific, stupid collared shirt and this specific, stupid pair of stiff jeans. She steps away from the table and faces you full-on.

Molly: Let me see you.

Oh, gosh, really? You curl up your toes in your Converse and squeeze your elbow as the cringe level increases. Let me see you . . . as if you're a little kid. As if this is the first time you've ever dressed yourself. As if you're a little kid playing dress up or showing off your Halloween costume. And here Ben and Mom stare at you with big, cheesy grins on their faces as if you're on the doorstep trick-or-treating, and they're oohing and ahing over how cool and impressive your costume is. Yeah, you're all playing dress up right now, everyone pretending as if everyone wants to be here.

Ben: You look sharp.

Look sharp. Yeah, it's sharp. It feels sharp. Every ounce of you wants to shrug off this scratchy polo-shirt and stiff jeans that the school calls their uniform. The shirt collar squeezes your neck, digs its fibers into your skin like there's still needles stuck to the threads. Even though you've only buttoned the lowest button—Mom said it's one of those stupid requirements—it chokes you. That's why it's been hard to breathe. You told yourself that's not true, that the shirt only worsened what was already happening and that will happen into a bigger happening if you don't watch out, and you can't have such a happening happen because you promised Ben last night that you'd be strong for Mom.

So, it's better to blame it on the shirt. It's the shirt's fault. No, it's the school's fault for making you wear this stupid, needle-punching shirt. You've stretched the collar as far as it'll go, but it still chokes you, which makes your chest hurt because your chest starts to think you can't breathe.

Molly: You look great.

She's grinning, trying to make you feel okay, trying to make you feel comfortable in these clothes you hate and in this morning you hate and wish you could just go back to sleep in. But she's not making you feel okay, and you don't feel comfortable in this morning that you hate and wish you could just go back to sleep in because this morning feels like a t-shirt that's been turned inside-out and washed and dried and someone handed it back to you still inside-out, declaring, "Wear it!" It's all so wrong.

Mom still stands in front of you as if waiting. She wants you to grin back. Ben wants you to grin back at her. They both don't seem to know that you can't.

You think Mom's grin shakes a little as she touches your elbow and goes back to the stove.

Molly: I made waffles, Jack.

Ben pulls out a chair at the end of the table.

Ben: Mm. Waffles. He glances at you. Jack?

You take the hint, holding back an eye-roll even though that hurts your eyes, and head to the spot at that table Mom's already set for you. You fumble with the back of the chair for a couple seconds before finally managing to pull it out. That's the second reason you gripped your elbow—to hide the shaking.

Ben rests his elbow on the table, holding his mug of coffee. He smiles at you then glances at Mom.

Ben: Almost wish I had a first day of school if it means we eat like this.

Mom sips her coffee with the smallest of smiles then turns to the fridge. When her back is turned, Ben looks at you.

Ben, quietly: You need to eat, Jack.

You stare at your plate, avoiding Ben's gaze and his command for you to eat. But you can't eat. What's Ben not getting? Sure, it's only two waffles, but right now, it's two mountains that you've been ordered to somehow cram in your mouth. Mission impossible.

Jack, mumbling: I'm not hungry.

Ben glances at Mom. She's walked to the pantry, giving no sign that she's heard you. Ben keeps his voice low as he speaks.

Ben: Well, Mom made them just for you so you better eat some.

It's the glare contest.

It's not your average staring contest. A staring contest is put on for fun when you watch each other's eyes well up and moisten and then blink and laugh. A glare contest, however, is a form of war. A silent war.

Ben's in one corner, and you're in the other. It's a wrestling match of who's going to be stubborn enough, whose thick head will triumph over the other: the guy who refuses to pick up the fork or the guy who wants to shove it down your throat. Each of you wait for the other to tap out and cry "uncle." Neither of you budge.

Molly: How's the waffles, Jack?

She's pouring coffee into her mug. Her back is to you. Ben raises his eyebrows and then breaks the glare war, taking a swig of coffee from his mug. But it's not a tap out, not a cry of "uncle." Far from it. It's victory. Because Ben always wins these wars.

Moms turned back around, and you feel her looking at you and, like a Jedi, sense her smiling that shaky smile. She taps her coffee mug with her nails. She's nervous, Jack, nervous. You're not doing a good job making her believe you're fine. Well, you're not but she can't know that. You promised Ben last night you'd be chill for her.

You glare at Ben one last time who munches away on his own waffles as if this were definitely not an inside-out-t-shirt day and purposefully ignores your glance. Fine. You'll eat them. But you're eating them for Mom, not for Ben.

You snatch up your fork and spear the prongs into a waffle.

Jack, mumbling: Good.

Molly: Oh, syrup!

Mom darts off to the pantry as if the fate of the Republic hangs in the balance and lies in her retrieving the bottle. Meanwhile, the fate of the Republic is just fine with Ben. He eats as if only his appetite hangs in the balance.

Ben, around a bite: I think they taste great without it.

You stab the piece of waffle you've finally managed to wriggle off the mother waffle, curling your toes tighter in your Converse at Ben's cheerful voice. Yeah, he's trying to make things better for Mom like you should be doing. But it's the way he glanced at you when he said it, the way he held his fork when he said it, the way he shifted when he said it, the way all of Ben's six-foot five body demanded you eat and

have a good attitude about it when he said it. As if your collar isn't choking you. As if your chest isn't starting to hurt.

But of course, Ben doesn't know these things, Jack. And he can't. If he does, he'll think you're freaking out and breaking your promise so he'll tell David, and if he tells David, David will think you're a wimp and lecture you on gutting it up and acting like an adult. And of course, Mom can't know these things either. You promised Ben you'd make this day good for her and keeping your promise to Ben will keep David from knowing anything. So you put the bite of the waffle in your mouth.

And it sits there.

You chew it and swallow. Nothing. The bite still sits on your tongue. You chew it some more and swallow. Nothing. In fact, the bite feels like it's gotten bigger instead of smaller. You chew and chew and chew, but somehow the bite keeps getting bigger and bigger and bigger, and your throat gets smaller and smaller and smaller, and your mouth gets drier and drier and drier until there's no saliva whatsoever to somehow shove this mega wad of dough down your throat.

You're going to choke. The collar strangles you and now this waffle bite suffocates you. You can't swallow it. There's no way. You should spit it back onto the plate where it apparently wants to be. But you got to swallow it. Ben wants you to swallow it. Mom's coming back, and she'll probably expect to see half the plate gone.

You squeeze your fork until the metal carves indentations between the skin of your fingers. You brace yourself. You swallow.

Mom sets the syrup on the table with the triumph of a slam dunk.

Molly: Here we go. Don't you want some syrup, hon?

It goes down. That Death Star wad of dough goes down. But as a Death Star size, it doesn't fit. And because it doesn't fit, it scratches the sides of your throat as it squirms down. And because it scratches your throat, you choke. You're coughing.

Mom looks alarmed.

Molly: Are the waffles dry? You want some syrup, Jack?

Ben still eats as if all is right with the Republic.

Ben: I think they're great.

You shake your head at Mom, still coughing. Geez, Mom's eyes are getting wider 'cause you're still coughing so you grab your glass of whatever this is Mom's put at your spot and gulp it down to hide the

cough and stop her from worrying, and for gosh sakes, would Ben please say something so Mom will stop staring so you can focus on not coughing and get this, what you now know is orange juice, down your throat too?

He does. From the corner of your eyes, you see him smirk at Mom.

Ben: So, what's your plans today with Jack not here to bug you? *He winks at you.*

Not funny, Ben. You're not sure which bugs you more: the wink, the bad joke, or this cough you still can't shake.

Ben: Want me to chauffeur you around town?

There. The juice and cough are gone. You put the cup down.

Mom glances at you. Crap, Jack, that was too hard. She's on to you, dude. Pull it together. She smiles and takes a small sip of coffee.

Molly: Not much on my agenda really.

Why does she glance at you again? Probably because you're holding your breath. She can tell. Mom always tells. Come on, dude, breathe. Exhale.

Mom glances at you again. So does Ben. Crap, Jack, too loud! Pull it together. Can't show Ben you're anxious or he'll tell David. Can't show Mom you're scared.

Ben clears his throat and smiles.

Ben: Guess I have you most of the day then. Lucky you.

Mom chuckles but it sounds scared.

Molly: Lucky me.

You got to force yourself to eat another bite of those dang waffles. You keep your eyes on your plate, hoping it'll hide your nervousness since she won't really see your face. But even though you're not looking at her, you know she's watching you, and you can't let her see you not eat 'cause then she'll know something's wrong. And even though there is something wrong, she can't know. So eat. Eat, Jack, dang it!

You feel Lucy scrounging for scraps under the table and thank God Ben's saying something about it and getting Lucy out and saying something that makes Mom laugh because now that her eyes are off you, you can focus on attacking the waffles and just shove, shove, shove them in, in, in, and make yourself swallow, swallow, swallow the bites and the orange juice that threaten to come back up, up, up.

You sit back, your mouth full of waffles that wait for your throat to open so they can shove themselves down. Inhale. Exhale.

Mom runs her eyes over you like a Lifeform scanner. Can she see that you're holding the waffles in your mouth? She must because her voice is doing that shaky smile again even though she doesn't say anything about it.

Molly: *Wow, Jack, I didn't know you'd be that hungry. Want me to make some more?*

You shake your head and quickly reach for what's left of your orange juice to try and down the waffles that threaten to catapult from your mouth. No, you don't want her to make some more. You want her to see you're about to puke and make this whole let's-play-school-dress up day come to an end.

Ben: *Looks like I better get the truck started.*

Mom stands up so fast her chair squeaks on the floor.

Molly: *Oh, I didn't see the time. She scrambles to gather the dishes on the table. Honey, go ahead and get your backpack.*

Get your backpack. So we're not done playing dress up. We're just getting started. You swallow.

And the waffle sticks in your throat.

CUT TO *interior of Ben's truck. Jack sits in the back bench and Molly sits in the passenger seat. The driver door opens as Ben climbs in and starts the ignition.*

Molly reaches for her purse and fumbles through it.

Molly: *Oh, Jack, I meant to put this in your backpack. There's some snacks in there in case you get hungry. She reaches behind her and passes him a granola bar. She smiles. I'll pack you a lunch Monday.*

FOCUS ON *Jack. You gingerly reach for the bar, trying to keep your arm steady. Already, you shake like the Millennium Falcon in the asteroid field, but you can't let Mom see that. You agreed with Ben last night that you'd be strong for her because Mom is nervous when there's nothing to be nervous about, Jack, so be cool for her, bud, so she'll see that really she's got nothing to worry about.*

You touch the packaging. Mom squeezes your hand. You look at her. Please, Mom. Will you please say you've changed your mind? Will you please say I don't have to go? Will you please tell Ben to turn off the truck? Would you please understand me?

But she only smiles and turns back around.

You lean back against the bench and exhale, doing your best to make sure Mom doesn't hear you this time. You wish they'd have let Lucy tag along. Then you'd have someone to whisper to, someone who agrees with you, someone who'd side with you even though you'd lose because right now, it's unfair with two against one. Then you'd have something to hold onto and stop the jitters. You refuse to hold your stupid backpack; you revolt at the thought. So you grip the granola bar instead. Maybe that will stop the shaking.

CUT TO a few minutes later as they drive through town, passing pastel-colored or cottage-themed businesses and homes suitable for the Carolina Coast. FOCUS ON Ben as he adjusts the rearview mirror and glances back at Jack. Jack stares out the side window, crinkling the granola bar packaging, his left knee bouncing like he's on a caffeine kick. You recognize the anxiety building in him and you haven't even gotten to the school parking lot.

He's already putting up mental blocks; you saw that at breakfast, and despite your effort to break the ice and hint to Jack he needed to change his attitude, Jack refused to engage. The continuous crinkling of the granola bar packaging tells you though that Jack's nerves are on edge, so you remind yourself that the attitude is caused by anxiety rather than by contempt. You try to anyway. You do wish he'd look at Mom. Pretty sure he's purposefully avoided eye contact because he knows she'll catch on to his panic, but he blew that cover as soon as he walked this morning rather than ran down the steps like usual. Keeping to himself just makes the tension worse for Mom.

There she goes looking over her shoulder at Jack. You can't tell whose eyes are more frightened—hers or Jack's. You switch on the radio. Music usually helps Jack. Maybe it'll help clear the atmosphere as well.

Brad Paisley sings about a southern comfort zone.

Right turn.

You smile, getting Mom's attention off Jack.

Ben: Breakfast sure was good.

Mom smiles and fiddles with her purse.

Molly: It was just waffles.

Ben: Yeah, but I haven't had 'em like that in a while.

You glance back at Jack. Jack doesn't make any sign that he even heard the music. Just keeps squeezing the granola bar which is bound to be crumbs now. His left leg still bounces but it sure isn't to the beat of the song. Really, Jack? Give you a toe tap, a head bob, something that tells you he's calming down and returning to normal. You expected to hear a complaint, a request to change the music to "something

more upbeat, something that slaps, something that doesn't sound like an old man." Arguing with you over music choices is one of Jack's favorite pastimes. Yours too actually. Everyone could use a little music banter right now.

You adjust the speakers so the music comes only from the back of the truck. Tim McGraw takes over with "Just to See You Smile."

Ben: Wish it was like that more often.

Molly: I think your weekend breakfasts are pretty good.

Ben: That's what I mean—more often. Not just the weekends. *You smirk.* Sure beats an egg sandwich every day.

Mom shakes her head and rolls her eyes.

Molly: You boys are never around long enough for me to cook breakfast. I barely have enough time to get the sandwiches off the griddle.

Ben glances up at Jack. Still nothing. Just a constant crinkling of the wrapper. Come on, Jack.

Mom points left.

Molly: Isn't this our turn here?

You look back at the road and switch on the turn signal.

Ben: Yeah, it is.

CUT TO the exterior of Elizabeth Community Academy as Ben's truck slowly pulls into the high school campus. Vehicles and people scatter across the parking lot, forcing the truck to a crawl. Ben switches off the radio.

FOCUS ON Jack as he sits up, taking in the surrounding vehicles and people. *Why are there so many? Parents and teens with backpacks march through the parking lot like the droid army on Naboo while cars and trucks creep through the fray like the Separatists Confederacy's assault tanks. You practically hear their feet marching to the frightening soundtrack, matching the rhythm of your heart that decided to join them.*

This is insane. Why are there so many? You don't remember there being this many, do you? A weight crashes into your chest, forcing you back against the bench. Your hands shake harder so you squeeze the granola bar harder. You gotta be imagining things. There can't be this many people. They can't be

marching like an endless line of droids. There can't be a creepy soundtrack playing—that's Ben's radio. Didn't he turn it on earlier—

POP.

Granola bits fly all over your lap and on the truck floor. Crap, Jack, you punctured the wrapper.

Mom looks over her shoulder.

Molly: Jack?

You scurry to pick up the crumbs, try to speak with a tongue that's suddenly too thick in a mouth that's suddenly too dry.

Jack: I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry—

Molly: Just leave it, honey, we'll get it later.

Ben glances up in the rearview mirror.

Ben: It's okay, Jack.

You look up at him then quickly look back at the floor. Ben is suspicious of you. You saw it in his eyes. You can't let Ben see your nervousness. If he does, Mom definitely will. If he does, he'll tell David. You've got to do this. For Mom. And so you don't have to hear it from David later.

Ben nears the entrance.

But those people outside . . . you hear them. And already, they're too loud.

Ben nears the entrance.

You want some water. No, you need water because your tongue is too thick and your mouth is too dry, but you refuse to open the backpack and get the water bottle Mom packed for you. You revolt at the thought of touching the zipper.

Ben, to Molly: Want me to drop him off and meet him at the front? Or do you want to walk?

No. No way. Drop you off in the midst of the droid army to find your way—alone?

Molly: Well, we could—

Jack: Can we walk? Please?

Mom turns and looks at you, and it's when you see her eyes reflecting your panic like a mirror and feel the seat belt cutting into your waist that you realize you've practically lunged yourself between her and Ben and your trembling hand vibrates her head rest. She grips her purse strap and bites her lips as if processing what your reaction means.

Crap, Jack. You're blowing this. You lurch back, your head smacking the back window, and shove your hands under your legs to hide the shakes. Mom's gaze lingers on you so you focus on the raised lines of the rubber mat on the truck floor, trying to count just how many granola crumbs are caught in its trenches.

Mom tucks a strand of hair behind her ear and smiles weakly, clearing her throat like she needs water too.

Molly: Sure, honey, we can walk.

Ben nods. And the truck moves through the droid army.

CUT TO the interior of the high school building as the automatic doors open. Molly, Jack, and Ben enter. Molly has her hand rested on the small of Jack's back. FOCUS ON Jack who stands between Molly and Ben, wildly twisting the granola bar wrapper. It sticks to your damp hands so bad that you've given up crunching it. But you have to keep twisting it because you have to stop your hands from shaking, and your hands shake because you're marching along with the droid army that's much bigger, much louder than you thought.

The walk through the parking lot about killed your legs. They already were as jiggly as Jello and the constant stopping and starting because of the too many cars threatened to topple you because you knew if you stopped you'd fall. Mom's hand on your back though reminded you that you had to walk for her.

Your shirt collar chokes you again, but you don't tug on it because your hands twist the wrapper as the high school sounds deafen you: shoes squeak on the linoleum floor, backpacks slap against bodies, and parents and students shout to be heard over this loud hum that echoes off the walls and rattles your eardrums.

You notice a teen slurping water from a fountain. Too loud. You notice two women laughing as they pin papers on a bulletin board. Too loud. You notice three guys cutting up together. Too loud and too big. And suddenly, you're noticing how big these teens are, noticing guys look bigger than you and wondering how fast they can run.

Sneakers squeak. Too loud. Lockers slam. Too loud. Teens talk. Too loud. Too big. Two guys fist bump. Too loud. Too big. Too loud, too, big, too loud, big, too loud, too big—

The wrapper rips in two.

Molly: Here, honey, let me take that for you.

No, please—

Mom takes the plastic from you and smiles as she pats your back.

No, you needed that. You needed that, Mom. A soda bottle that has been shaken too hard for too long seems to bubble inside your stomach as you march down the hall with the droid army towards the lockers that students open and bang shut too loud. You don't remember this. You don't remember school having so many people. And you're walking into them.

Your hands won't stop trembling. They don't want to be here. They don't want to be here because they don't belong here. But they got to go somewhere before they snap off your wrists because they shake so hard. You grip your backpack strap and wince as repulse immediately washes over you as if you've touched one of those dead jellyfish you've seen on the beach when you go for runs with Ben. You grip it anyway, fighting the urge to jerk your collar that now slowly begins closing around your neck. The canvas presses against your sweaty palms.

Ben smiles at you as if oblivious to the too loud droid army.

Ben: Not so bad, is it?

The soda bottle's top pop offs. Carbon swells.

No, not so bad. Terrible. It's absolutely terrible. The droid army is too loud, too big, and you want to look at Ben and shout like Luke Skywalker, "Why are we still moving toward it!"

Mom points at an open door at the end of the lockers where a handful of way too big teens shuffle through.

Molly: Here's your first class.

The swelling carbon fizzes throughout your insides. Waffle bits shoot up your throat. You stop. Mom and Ben stop with you and look at you funny, waiting for you to say something. Only you can't say something because your shirt collar finally squeezed shut like a drawstring and chokes you, and you can't look at them because your eyeballs decided to glue themselves to the floor. The painful weight is back on your chest and pushes your heart like a radio button and drops a loud beat.

But you have to speak above the loud droid army and the drop beat and through the choking collar and the painful weight. Because the soda fizz now rumbles up your throat and brings the waffles up with it.

Jack: I-I need to go to the bathroom.

You practically feel the glance Ben and Mom share as her hand presses deeper in your back. Is that your spine shaking now or her hand? Either way, you hear a shaking smile in her voice.

Molly: Sure, hon. Are-are you all-

Ben: I'll take him. *He's got his hand on your shoulder and spins you around before Mom can even finish asking if you're okay. Wait here, Mom, I got him.*

And you're actually okay with Ben steering you back down the hall before Mom can ask because now the waffle dances in your mouth and is ready to party.

CUT TO *interior of one of the high school restrooms. The door flings open with a resonating BANG as Jack flies in. His backpack crashes onto the floor, and he skids into a stall, slamming the door shut with another BANG.*

FOCUS ON *Ben as he enters the restroom. Jack's retching noises echo against the tiled walls. You sigh, tugging on your ball-cap brim to scratch your forehead. This is not going well at all. Though the parking lot was a bit hectic, the school itself was relatively small and far from the crazy busy public school you remembered. You thought Jack would be pretty cool about it and even hinted that it wasn't as bad as he'd imagined. Then he froze up in the hallway and about gave Mom a panic attack herself. You were surprised she didn't back down and march out with Jack right then and there. She still might though now that she's alone and most likely hypothesizing various equations as to why Jack suddenly needed to be in the bathroom. You got to get Jack calm. If he continues to panic, he'll not only completely shut himself down, but he'll also make Mom a nervous wreck.*

At least you're alone. Jack is extremely self-conscious. People would just add—

Oh, great. A kid exits a stall, tugging up his jeans zipper and awkwardly glancing between you and the stall where Jack's vomiting sounds reverberate. You do the awkward Southern hey-how-you're-doing-I've-acknowledged-your-existence-smile-and-nod which the kid doesn't return. Thankfully, he quickly washes his hands and hurries out the door as if worried he'll catch Jack's sickness.

If only it were that simple.

The stall door unlocks. Jack shakily emerges, head bowed. He fumbles with one of the sink faucets. You stoop and pick up Jack's backpack, purposefully keeping your gaze on the floor to give Jack some mental space as he cleans himself up. You can tell he's embarrassed; it's why he had his head tucked between his bony shoulders as if it would fall off otherwise.

The water shuts off. Paper towels eject and rip off. Now you look at Jack.

Jack clutches the edge of the sink, his head still bowed and hidden between his shoulders. You try and catch a glimpse of his face in the mirror but his head is bent too far down.

Ben: Jack?

FOCUS ON Jack's white face. You grip the counter for dear life because if you let go, your Jello legs will snap and you'll fall down a deep, dark cliff that you can't climb back up. Your heart keeps blasting the drop beat in your ears while your breath rises to keep up with the sick rhythm crashing against your chest. Gosh, your chest hurts so bad right now. It's like your ribcage is a car speaker rattling from the bass jacked up in your ears.

Your knuckles hurt from your grip but you got to let go because one frightening thought surfaces in your sea of thoughts: you're going to be late.

You can't be late. Bad things happen when you're late. Everyone stops what they're doing. The teacher clears her throat and raises her eyebrows like Grand Moff Tarkin as Princess Leia enters. The class stares at you. The teacher calls you out.

Bad things happen when you're late. And you will be late because didn't Mom point to your classroom and weren't there kids filing in and doesn't that mean it's started and weren't you delayed with your stupid throwing up and won't that mean you'll be late and don't bad things happen when you're late? And you'll be late because Mom—

Your ears are hot and now hurt from your heart's blaring music. The collar strangles you. Your chest tightens. Is this why it's hard to breathe?

You got to let go of this counter, Jack. You got to go or you'll be late. But your fingers grip even harder as if they know better than you. No, no, Jack, we'll fall if we let go. We got to hang on. But I'm going to be late. No, Jack, we'll fall—I'm going to be late—No, Jack, we'll fall.

Somehow you hear Ben say your name over the bass hammering your ears. But you don't have time to talk to Ben. You're late—doesn't Ben know that? You can't be late because bad things happen when you're late so let go of this stupid countertop before you're late. You got to go—no, Jack, we'll fall—You got to go now—no, Jack, we'll—Come on, go! No, Jack, we'll—

Ben says your name again. There's no time, Ben. There's no time, fingers. How long have you been standing here holding the counter and trying to talk to your hands over the loud drop beat and through the never-ending pressure on your chest? Probably at least ten minutes. Which means you're late. And you can't be late because everyone will look at you when you enter. The class will know you're backwards. You're late—do they carry water bottles in their backpacks or leave them in the lockers? Let go of the counter—no, Jack, we'll—You're late—How fast can they run? Let go now—no, Jack, we'll—You're

late—Can you still fit in a locker? Let go—no, Jack—You're late—How heavy does a fist from a big kid feel? Let—no, Jack—You're late—How heavy is the teacher's textbook this time? Let—no, Jack—You're late-late-late-late—

You shove off the counter and whirl around. Where's the door, where's the door, where's the door? Your legs give way just like your fingers said they would, but you catch yourself and stumble forward. Ben says something to you. No time, Ben.

Jack: I'm late.

FOCUS ON Ben who drops Jack's backpack and closes the distance between Jack and him in two quick steps.

Ben: Whoa, Jack.

You grab Jack's shoulders, his thin frame quivering in his hands. You're practically holding him up. You weren't able to get a good look at Jack when you tried to get his attention, but now you see how pale he is, how wild his eyes are, how short and fast his breath comes. It's worse than you'd thought. In just a few quick seconds, he went from an upset stomach to a full-on panic attack. You've seen this in Jack before not so long ago in what you call Old Jack. Old Jack is the one you grew up with, the one trapped in a medicative shell and programmed like a Clone to mindlessly do whatever anxious side effects the meds demanded. It took two years to pull Real Jack from that shell and another two years for you to get to know Real Jack. But, crap, Ben, have you brought Old Jack out of the closet? Are you stuffing Real Jack back inside? Maybe this was a bad idea. Maybe he isn't ready for this after all. Maybe—

What are you doing, Ben? You're supposed to be the sensible one here. You've been here before with Jack. You know how to get him out of a galaxy far, far away. Snap out of it. Snap him out of it.

Quickly, you guide Jack to the tiled wall.

Ben: Come here. Just stand here for a minute.

FOCUS ON Jack. You slump against the wall, trying to focus. Black dots dance in your eyes, jumping to the crazy fast track of your heart. Are you having a heart attack? Wait, Ben's getting a better grip on your shoulders like he's trying to keep you here. No, you can't stay here. What's Ben doing? You're late. That's worse than a heart attack. You got to go. Oh, gosh, your chest hurts.

You push against Ben.

Jack: I'm late.

Ben pushes you back, gently squeezing your shoulders.

Ben: No, you're not late. Now I need you to—

You're not late? Really? Haven't you been here for hours? Well, if you're not late, then you will be. And you can't be late. If you're late, everyone's going to look at you, everyone's going to think about you, everyone's going to know that you're backwards and—You've been in here too long. You know you have—you've felt time slipping from you. You've got to tell Ben about the time because Ben doesn't know, but your shirt collar strangles you. Gosh, your chest hurts so bad. You're not having a heart attack, are you? Aren't you too young for that?

Focus, Jack! Get the words out before it's too late. Here you go, sounding like a squawking bird again.

Jack: I will be!

Ben: No, you won't, Jack. We got here early, on purpose, remember? *He bends his head so he can look you in the eye and repeats the word with more emphasis. Remember?*

You grip your head as the room tilts, squeezing your eyes shut, trying to make the black dots go away. Will your heart please stop blasting this loud pulse? You can't hear Ben. It blares through your ears and makes the dots want to dance harder. Ben asked you to remember something. Remember . . . remember what?

Ben: You're getting yourself all worked up. Come on, bud, don't do this to yourself. *He keeps his hands on your shoulders. Breathe. Breathe.*

You gasp for air. Ben told you to breathe. You heard that. You try to take a deep breath, but gosh, it hurts. You wince and a weird, baby bird squawk comes out of your mouth which makes you cough.

But you got to breathe. Ben asked you to. And Ben's thumbs rub your shoulders and that reminds you that Ben is still here, so if your Jello legs give way again, you'll be okay because Ben will hold you up, which means you don't have to focus on standing so you can instead concentrate on breathing. Like Ben asked you to.

Okay. Okay, breathe. Okay. Okay, breathe.

Ben: It's all right. It's all right.

The black dots are gone. It's not so hard to breathe now. That stupid beat is finally not quite as loud. You manage to raise your head and catch sight of the door. Wait, is that someone there? Does the door crack? No, please, don't let someone come in and see you like this because then they'll know— Ben turns so that his frame blocks the door from your view.

Ben: No one's here. It's just you and me, bud. Now, let's calm down, okay? We can't have Mom see you like this, right?

No, they can't have Mom see you like this. They talked about it last night, right? You've got to be there for her because she's just as scared as you. You swallow to ease your constricted throat and then try another breath. This one doesn't hurt so bad. So, you take another one, concentrating now on stopping the trembles rocking your body.

Ben keeps one hand on your shoulder and gradually bends to grab your backpack. He puts a strap over your left shoulder. Immediately, you grip it. It doesn't repulse you now; you need your armadillo shell back, you need something for your twitching hands that still don't belong here. The canvas fibers press into your palms. Already, that feels better.

FOCUS ON Ben.

Ben: *All right. Jack looks at you. Good. The backpack trick's working; it gives him something to hold, something to calm him. Now, remind him of what he'll do today to get him focused, show how it's far from as bad as he imagines. It's just half a day, remember? You remember first days. You're just here to get yourself situated, get familiar with everything. That's it. We'll be right back here in only a few hours.*

FOCUS ON Jack. *Your chest doesn't hurt too much now. You nod and exhale. Right, it's a short day. It's a short day, Jack. It won't be long.*

Ben grips your shoulder and looks you straight in the eye.

Ben: *You can do this, okay?*

You swallow and nod again. Right, you can do this.

CUT TO *the exterior of the bathroom. Oh no. Mom's standing out here biting her knuckle as if contemplating whether she should knock on the guys' bathroom or not. You're freaking her out, Jack. She hurriedly stands straight when she sees you and puts on her worried smile. She touches your lower back again, and again, you wonder if it's your spine or her hands that shakes.*

Molly: *All good? You ready?*

Ben winks and clicks his tongue, fist bumping your shoulder.

Ben: *You bet he is.*

You clutch your backpack strap that's starting to feel more like a comfortable armadillo shell than a repulsive backpack. You nod.

The hallway isn't as busy anymore with class time nearing so you don't feel like you're marching straight into a droid army quite so much; more like trying to sneak into Jabba the Hutt's palace with C-3PO and

R2-D2. A stopper props open your first classroom door so that a few rows of tables and chairs are visible. Most of them are already taken by students. A soft rumble echoes in the room as the students laugh and converse while waiting.

You swallow. There's so many of them. Will they all look as you come in?

Mom tugs you from the entrance as two students brush past and enter the classroom. She then reaches into her purse and pulls out a piece of white paper. On it is the hand-drawn map of the high school's layout that you two worked up after visiting the school a few weeks back. It was the worst craft project of your life. Three colored rectangles specifically stand out: red, green, and blue.

Molly: Okay. This is your map, remember? She points at the colored rectangles. Here are your different classes with the colors we picked out—blue for English, green for biology, and red for algebra. The times are right here. And their names in case you forget. And remember here's everything else: bathrooms, cafeteria, principal's office—let's hope you don't have to go there. She forces a chuckles at her lame joke and smiles up at you. Okay?

That paper alone makes the place feel too big. So many rectangles. So many lines. So many names. You take the paper from Mom and hope she doesn't see your hand still trembling. You nod so she won't hear the little bird squawk.

Ben: You'll do great, bud. He winks. The Force is with you, Obi-Wan.

You try to smile at Ben's attempt to ease you because what you should say is "And with you, master" in your best Ewan McGregor impression. It's been an on-going joke between you and Ben since you were in first grade: you are Obi-Wan and he's Qui Gon Jinn, mainly because you two have always worked well together despite the eight years between you and because Ben usually does have some pretty wise lines every now and then. Originally, David was supposed to be Qui Gon, Ben Obi-Wan, and you Anakin Skywalker, but David hated Star Wars 'cause it was too make believe and said if he had to be a fictional character, he'd rather be Batman 'cause at least that guy saves people and is rich while doing it. And you'd thought that was a dumb idea because Jedi did save people, and you didn't know a thing about Batman then because Mom had said you were too little to watch it. So, you and Ben scrapped the idea and just stuck with you two, which worked out because you can do Obi-Wan's voice pretty well and Ben is terrible at impressions, which means he laughs at yours and you like making Ben laugh.

So, you should say in Obi-Wan's voice, "And with you, master," to make him laugh, which would make Mom laugh, which would make everyone feel better. But you don't. Instead, you lick your lips and think great at what, master? Great at messing up? Great at looking stupid? Great at getting laughed at?

Mom pulls you into a hug, her chin on your shoulder. You hold her tightly, and despite all of Ben's pep talks, all of your self-motivational speeches, all of your reminders that you made a promise to Ben, you still hope she won't let go. You hope she'll snatch the map from you and tear it to shreds. You hope she'll look at Ben and say no way Jose. You hope she'll shove you back in Ben's truck as fast as she can and slam the accelerator—

Then it strikes you who's trembling: her. No, wait. That's wrong. Mom can't tremble, she can't be scared. That's your job, not hers. Look what you're doing to her, Jack. You can't do this to Mom. Not after all she's done for you.

So you force your shaking arms, your drop-beating heart, and your racing mind to do what you never wanted her to do to you as soon as she said you were going back to school.

You let her go.

Mom steps back to Ben. Her eyes are misty but she's smiling. That's good. Ben nods and smiles at you too.

Ben: See ya in a bit.

In a bit. It's just a bit. You can do a bit. What idiot can't do a bit? You shoulder your backpack and turn to the open door. So many people in there. You look back over his shoulder at Mom and Ben who still stand there, still smile, still wait for you to cross the threshold. It's just for a bit. You can do a bit. What idiot can't do a bit?

You take a deep breath and step into the room.

FOCUS ON Molly as Jack enters the classroom and disappears from view. Now that he's gone, you drop the smile and bite your knuckle again. He's gone. Should you go back in and check on him? Make sure he found a good seat? Is he all right?

Ben touches your shoulder and tenderly turns you around.

Ben: Come on. My turn to spend the day with you. Lucky you.

You chuckle weakly as he leads you back to the entrance, but not before you look over your shoulder to check if Jack will come flying out like he did the first day you left him at kindergarten. He doesn't.

Molly: Lucky me.

Eight

Promises of Home

FOCUS ON *a ticking classroom wall clock and ZOOM IN on the time. 7:30.*

CUT TO *Jack sitting in the classroom. He glances nervously about him as a male teacher points to class notes on a dry erase board. Jack looks up at the clock. 7:37. ZOOM IN on the clock and FADE INTO the wall clock in the Griffith kitchen. Molly sits at the kitchen table, hands folded as if in prayer and chin resting on them in contemplation.*

You take a deep breath and squeeze your hands even tighter together to prevent yourself from reaching for your phone and texting Jack if he's okay, reminding him that he should call if he has any problems and you'll be there immediately. But you know he knows that, Molly. And you know Ben watches you from the living room where he pretends to read that chunk of a Brandon Sanderson book; you never have known how he can read books so big. Even as a child, he devoured that Harry wizard thing and those books were thick, from what you remember.

Thick like the textbook that idiot of a teacher had the audacity to smack Jack's head with. No, Molly, that's not happening again. This is a good school with lots of credentials. Come on, get back to sorting the mail. You're supposed to be separating the junk from the bills and then sorting between David's bills and Ben's bills; they always split the payments.

But you've already done that. There they sit, three little stacks perfectly in line, two white and one colored. Why are you suddenly moving so fast and time suddenly moving so slow?

Ben: You good, Mom?

You snap out of your musing and tap the stack of David's bills on the table.

Molly: Just fine.

No harm going through these bills again.

ZOOM IN *on the paper bills in Molly's hands and FOCUS ON the school map in Jack's hands as he walks down the hall. You finger the colored paper to give your twitching thumbs something to do. A teen bumps into your backpack. You stumble back a few steps.*

Teen: Sorry, dude, excuse me.

You take a deep breath before your heart can play “Pump Up the Volume” again. Come on, Jack, the guy moved on. He didn’t purposefully smack you, he’s in a hurry like you. Yeah, but he felt really big. And heavy. Wonder what his fist would feel like . . .

How about wonder if you’re in the right place, idiot? You glance at your paper then to the door on your right. Yep, algebra. This is it. Come on, it’s only for a bit. You can do a bit. What idiot can’t do a bit? You step into the classroom.

CUT TO the Griffith backyard. Molly furiously digs a trowel into a flowerpot, churning the old soil to make way for the new. In the background behind her, Ben rides a small lawnmower. Molly looks at her wristwatch. 11:15. ZOOM IN on her wristwatch and FADE INTO a ticking classroom wall clock. 12:20.

Another male teacher stands in front of his desk and makes some lame joke about combining the alphabet with numbers as he dismisses the class. The room of teenagers chuckle and rise from their seats. Metal chairs scrape against the floor.

You wince at the screeching noise and leap to your feet, swinging your backpack across you so that it slaps your back. You inhale and exhale. Come on, stay calm. You’ve done good so far. You already had the mini practice “lunch break” which you weren’t hungry for and did good not being noticed. Everyone had been chattering and laughing and catching up with old classmates or wanting to meet new ones, but you had no one to catch up with and definitely didn’t want to meet new ones, and the cafeteria had buzzed too loudly with talking and tableware rattling and lunch bags zipping and unzipping that you didn’t want to go in anyway. So, you found a bench by the bathrooms and scrolled through pictures of you and Lucy and Mom on your phone, pretending to be busy so no one would talk to you. It worked.

So chill, Jack, chill. You’re almost done. You check the time on your phone. 12:23. Yeah, you’re almost done. Just a bit more. You can do a bit. What idiot can’t do a bit?

CUT TO the Griffith kitchen. Molly stands at the stove, her chin resting on her steepled fingers as she rocks back and forth on her heels. You look down at the stove clock. 1:00. Almost done. Almost done. Is he all right? What class is he in right now? English, right? You remember meeting that teacher, Mary Bridges, and liking her. She seemed pleasant and happy to teach; you felt comfortable with her immediately. Surely, she’ll do the same with Jack.

The back door opens and Ben steps into the kitchen, his shirt damp with Carolina sweat. He smiles at you as he walks to the sink.

Ben: You still good, Mom?

You blink then grab the rag lying on the electric stove and scrub the top furiously.

Molly: Yes. I'm fine.

Ben turns on the faucet and pumps soap into his hand, scrubbing up to his elbows.

Ben: Good.

ZOOM IN on Ben's scrubbing hands and FOCUS ON Jack's left hand drumming the top of a desk. Your right knee bounces, quietly tapping the desk's bottom. You've sat too long today. Your mind roars at you, shouting against this tyranny, demanding you set your body free, and your body agrees with your mind and shakes you to wake you up so bounce goes the knee and drum go the fingers. Hey. Hey, we want out. Bad. We want to bounce, jump, run. Oh, running would be good. Running out of here.

You inhale and drum your fingers faster. Stop it. Stop it, brain. You glance up at the clock. 1:30. We're almost done. We're almost done.

The teacher moves from the front of her desk to the dry erase board behind it. You think she said her name was Mary Bridges. You remember because Mary sounds like Molly. She perches her reading glasses on the top of her hair. That reminds you of Mom too. Her southern accent is so light, you could hear the smile in her voice without her lips doing the job for her. She points to the list of words on the board.

Mary Bridges: Okay. Figured y'all would appreciate it if I started first week with something light. *She winks.* I want y'all to copy these words and look up what they mean when you get home. These are some interesting pieces of American history, and they'll give us some background on the books we'll start discussing on Monday. Like the bed wrench, right? That'll be interesting.

You don't care what a bed wrench is and if it's interesting or not. All you care about is one word: Copy.

Mary: School's out in five minutes but remember full hours start on Monday, 'kay? Soon as y'all finish copying the words, you can go. See y'all Monday.

Backpacks open. Notebooks open. Paper rustles. Pens click. You've got to hurry. You've got to keep up.

Just when you thought you'd do well today, you're given this ankle-breaker that sends you sprawling. There's a no-phone policy for classes at this school which means you can't just snap a picture of the board. Sure, you wrote some things down today like the names of your teachers so you don't forget or their specific expectations so you won't forget those or how long real classes actually last so you won't forget that either. But that was on your time. No one was required to do it, no one else could compare with you. Now they can.

Hurry, idiot, or they'll think you're slow!

You fumble with the zipper on your backpack. Crap, why is it stuck? Okay there. Slap your notebook on the desk then rummage to find a pen, a pencil, a marker, anything. Bump a case. Right, pencil case. Jerk it open and fumble with the pencils. Every one sticks to your sweaty fingers only to fall back in the box.

Grip one. There. Snap the pencil case. Zip up the backpack—oh, crap!

The pencil leaps from your hand, laughing at you as it rolls across the floor and under the desk of the girl next to you.

The weight settles back on your chest.

The girl bends down, grabs the pencil by her foot, and smiles as she hands it to you.

You take it from her and quickly plant your left elbow on the desk, hiding your face with your hand. Great. She probably thinks you're so stupid, so slow, so backwards for fumbling with everything. You saw all the colored gel pens on her desk and how she was writing each word in a different color. One of those types. Bet she'd be real good writing stupid on notes. Probably would write each letter in a different color. Wait, what are you even doing anyway? Right, the words. The words on the board.

You swallow as you look up. There's a list of six definitions but each one has more than one word. And the letters are all fuzzy. Broken. Backwards. The weight pushes against your chest and presses play. The beat thunders in your ear.

"Pump up the volume, pump up the volume."

You force your hand to write. Come on, you can do this. You can read at home. These are just like words at home, right? But you're not at home, are you, Jack? You're not reading and writing with Mom and Ben, are you, Jack? You're reading and writing with other teens who read and write really fast and probably can run and snatch backpacks really fast and probably can chant "Jack and Jill" really fast too.

Wait, what's that letter? Is it an I or a T? Or could it be an L? The letters keep flipping and laughing as they dance to the beat your heart plays. Over the blasting, the letters shout that the song isn't loud enough and demand your chest pump up the volume. So the weight presses harder and your pulse rattles your ear drums.

"Pump up the volume, pump up the volume, pump up the volume, dance, dance!"

You try to take a deep breath but your lungs don't cooperate. Okay, fine, a short breath. Just get these stupid words down.

Number 2.

Notebooks close. Backpacks zip. Chairs slide back.

They're done. They're done, and you're still on the second one. They're done, and they'll see how slow you are because you're still on the second one and they'll nudge and laugh and throw balled up notes at your head and —

Focus, Jack! The third word. Come on, what's the third word? Your hand shakes. The pencil rips the paper. Start a new line. Come on, what's the third word?

Students shuffle out. You hear their voices, you hear your teacher saying stuff to them, but you can't understand what they say because your pulse is too loud. Your breath comes in short bursts now. You want to breathe deeper but your lungs can't hear your demand 'cause your pulse is so dang loud.

The pencil sticks to your palm. Sticks to the paper. It doesn't want to move.

Mary: Can I help you?

You look up. You're the only one left. Everyone's gone. It's just you.

Just you and the teacher.

Mary: Do you need some help?

Oh, crap. No. No, she can't see you need help. If she sees, she'll know you're slow. If she knows, she'll grab a textbook. If she grabs a textbook. . .

She's coming towards you. The black dots are back and join your heart's dance party, but you can still see her getting closer. Remember the last time a teacher came to you . . . remember the screech of that voice, remember the weight of that book smacking the back of your head, remember the pain of the table shouting throughout your face.

You jump up, knees banging the table, but you hardly feel the bruises. You fumble with your notebook, trying to shove it in your backpack which suddenly doesn't want to open wide enough. Your sweaty palms stick to everything. Your shaking hands drop everything. The backpack slaps your back.

The teacher smiles.

Mary: You're Jack, right?

You've got to get out of here.

The room tilts.

You crash on a chair. You try to stand but your Jello legs won't work. No, get out of here! Legs, come one! Where are you anyway? Why is the room getting dark?

Mary: Whoa, honey!

Strange hands catch your shoulders. No, strange hands are bad. Strange hands snatch your hoodie and backpack, strange hands put suckers in your hair, strange hands whack you with textbooks. Bad, Jack, bad, bad. You jump and squirm at being touched, try to break free, but the hands won't budge.

Mary: Hey, it's okay. It's okay. Sit here, honey.

Everything's shutting off. Your muscles, your lungs, your sight. Nothing wants to listen because nothing can listen because your chest keeps pushing your heart and your heart keeps blasting your pulse and your pulse keeps pumping and it's too loud and nothing can hear you. Strange hands touch you, strange hands pull you, but you can't get away because your body can't hear you.

Is that a chair beneath you? You think so. You're sitting on something hard and something stiff presses against your back. Where'd your backpack go? You want your backpack, you want your armadillo shell—oh gosh, have they tugged it off you? Is the spinning coming? Is that why you're sitting down?

Strange hands touch your face. No, stop! You jerk or want to jerk anyway because your body stopped listening to you long ago. You think you hear a voice tell you that she's just checking. Checking what? You missed it because of your roaring pulse. Are they checking to see if their water bottles are full? Are they checking—ah! What's a flashlight in your eyes for? That's new. Are you back at the doctor's? How'd the heck you get there? Where are you? Stupid black dots, stop dancing so you can see!

Your teacher's voice. You hear her.

Mary: Hold on just a sec, honey.

Footsteps hurry. Why did she leave in a rush? Are you in trouble? Is she coming back with something hard, something heavy to hit you with for not getting the words? The words! You need the words. But where's your backpack? You can't see it. The dots are taking over everything.

The footsteps return. The strange hand is back on your shoulder.

Mary: Take a deep breath, honey. It's all right.

Is that a flower? Is that Mom's lilac detergent? Where's that smell coming from? Is Mom here? Someone told you to breathe. But you can't breathe. Your lungs won't work, and gosh, your chest hurts.

Mary: It's all right, honey. Come on, deep breath.

A soft hand moves to your bouncing knees. That feels like Mom. It must be Mom because only she does that. She's come to get you. Thank God. Wait, aren't you supposed to do something for her? Didn't Ben tell you something you were supposed to do? Maybe it was breathe. You can breathe for Mom. You can make your lungs hear you over the crazy music of your heart for Mom.

Inhale. Exhale. Gosh, that hurts. But you smell the flowers that sort of smell like Mom's lilac detergent, and you want to keep smelling it because it means Mom is here. All that's missing is the old, soft t-shirt.

Inhale. Exhale.

Mary: There you go.

The hand that feels like Mom's rubs your knee but the voice isn't Mom's at all. The black dots are gone now. Your chest doesn't hurt quite so bad. Your pulse doesn't pump quite so loud. That means your body can finally hear your commands. Eyes, focus. Head, look down.

It's your teacher. Mary Bridges. You remember you didn't have to write down her name because you easily remembered that Mary kind of sounds like Molly. That's her hand on your knee, not Mom's. Strange. A teacher's hand touches you but it doesn't hurt.

She smiles up at you.

Mary: There we go, much better. You all right?

Her voice. It's calming. It reminds you of Mom. Except Mary Bridges's has a thicker lilt to it. It's why the way she says right sounds like she's missing the letter t. You like it. It reminds you of sweet tea and apple pie. If one said pie like pah.

She asked if you were all right. Normal people answer, idiot. But normal people probably don't have a trembling body and a locked jaw that refuses to move. So, you just nod.

She now rubs your knee. Somehow, it makes you want to take another deep breath, especially now that your chest doesn't hurt so bad and you can finally hear. You think your knee slows its bouncing but you could be imagining because only Mom has that power.

She smiles again.

Mary: *Oh, that's good. She lifts a white plastic bottle closer to your nose, and you realize that's where the flower smell comes from. Can you do that again for me, hon?*

Hon. Honey. She's been calling you that. Like Mom. That's one of the few words that shows Mom actually has a slight southern lilt, but the way Mary Bridges says hon sounds like she's emphasizing the uh in hug. In fact, her voice sounds like what you'd imagined a hug would sound like if a hug was a person. You wonder if honey is what she uses to sweeten her tea.

Mary: *You are Jack, right? She chuckles. I know I called out names in class today, but this ole' brain forgets half the time. You should see me with my kids. She grins. Sometimes, I get their names mixed up with the dog's.*

That reminds you of Mom too. When she's flustered, she'll call you by one big name: David-Ben-Jack-Lucy-which-one-are-you-Griffith. You kind of want to smile back at Mary Bridges, especially since she said dog like dawg, but your jaw's still locked. Probably because it's trying to keep your mouth from shaking like the rest of your body.

Mary Bridges moves her hand from your knee and touches your left hand's fingers, as if asking if it's okay. Yeah, that feels okay. It kind of feels like Mom. Which is probably why your hand holds hers. Oh, your hands are twitching, still demanding you set your body free. Well, don't squeeze your teacher's hand, Jack. That'd be weird.

Mary Bridges smiles again. She's pretty good at that.

Mary: *How old are you, Jack?*

Oh, no. Why does she want to know? Probably because she's trying to judge just how slow you are, just how stupid you are for having a panic attack. Again.

Mary: *Are you sixteen?*

Your jaw is still locked. And your shirt collar starts to close in on your neck again. Your right hand twitches like crazy, and it takes lots of commanding to get your left hand to not squeeze Mary Bridges's. Here we go. She's gonna find out just how stupid you are. You really don't want her to know. But you learned a long time ago never to ignore a teacher. So, you nod.

Mary: Nice. My son is fifteen. His name's Trevor. He goes to school here too. Have you met him yet?

You shake your head. O-okay. That's not the response you expected. Teachers are supposed to show you how dumb you are. Maybe all that apple pie and iced tea sweetness has not only affected her voice but also affected her brain. You want her to know though that you didn't mean for this to happen, that yeah, you're sixteen and a year behind (you heard David tell Mom that the other night), but you're not stupid.

Your jaw wriggles a little but the shirt collar is still too tight, and your tongue feels heavy.

Jack: S-sor-sorry—

Boy, you sound stupid. But Mary Bridges waves her hand dismissively and settles back in a chair across from you.

Mary: Don't be sorry. First days are a doozy, aren't they? Even I want to fall over. *She taps the plastic bottle.* It's why I carry this.

You doubt that. She's just trying to make you not feel stupid. But the fact that she's trying to make you not feel stupid rather than emphasize just how stupid you are is . . . well, nice. It does make you wonder though if she even knows how to be a teacher.

You also wonder if she ever stops smiling. She may not know how to be a teacher, but she sure knows how to smile.

Mary: Are you in Mr. Jordan's biology class?

Mr. Jordan's biology class? You think so. The name sounds familiar. You don't remember because you're always forgetting, which is why you wrote down your teachers' names in your notebook. But your notebook is in your backpack—where is your backpack again? You do know you're in biology anyway.

You lift your heavy tongue.

Jack: Y-yes.

Mary: Trevor's in his class. Maybe you two will have group projects together.

You hope not. You don't want anything to do with a group. You do want your backpack. Or the wrapping paper of a granola bar. Or anything. Your hands are going nuts. They'll fly off your wrists if you don't get something.

Mary Bridges must notice because she bends down and retrieves your backpack from the floor, gently placing it in your lap. So that's where it went. Immediately, you snatch the straps and hug the backpack close, fingers fiddling the plastic buckles. Much better.

Mary Bridges glances up at the clock.

Mary: Do you drive, Jack, or is someone coming for you?

Your tongue is still heavy.

Jack: My-my mom. And brother.

Mary stands but keeps herself bent like she doesn't want to tower over you. She tucks her hair behind her ears like Mom. You'd think her cheeks would hurt by now from all this smiling.

Mary: Can I walk you to the front? Will that be okay?

You swallow. Yeah. Yeah, you guess that'd be okay. Your legs are still Jello rather than legs anyway. She seems like she'd help if you needed it.

You nod and sling your backpack over your shoulder. You lean on the chair as you stand, hoping Mary Bridges doesn't see your knees knocking each other.

She carefully places her hand on your back as she guides you to the door. Also like Mom. How does she know all this? She hands you the plastic bottle.

Mary: Why don't you hold this for me?

It means one of your hands will have to let go of your backpack straps. But that might be okay. You can squeeze the bottle, right?

You tug your left hand from the canvas and grip the plastic instead. You take a deep breath and flowers flood your senses.

Mary: Phew, you're tall for sixteen.

Tall? She should see your brothers. You're not tall. You're scrawny and short compared to them. She's just short. Like Mom. You decide that's also how you'll remember Mary Bridges's name. M—Mary, Molly, Mom.

Mary: You got a favorite subject, Jack?

You think this plastic bottle flower smell helps move your heavy tongue.

Jack: Math.

Mary: Math? *She leads you into the hall.* I never was good at that.

CUT TO *Ben and Molly sitting in the truck, waiting in a line of vehicles outside Elizabeth Community Academy.*

FOCUS ON *Ben as he eases the truck forward an inch only to stop again. Mom scrunches her purse strap over and over as she gazes out the windshield as if hoping to catch a glimpse of the school doors.*

Molly: I forgot how much I hated this part.

Ben: You and me both.

Mom bites her lip.

Molly: You know what? Just, just find a parking space. We'll walk.

You tap the steering wheel with your thumbs. Mom's been a ticking time bomb all day, waiting to explode. She's done pretty good holding her anxiety in check, you'll admit, though no number of distractions eased her. You're tempted to tell her you should stay in line, get her accustomed to this again, you know, and not hyper fixate on Jack. Then again, this is the first day. Walking would probably do her some good anyway.

Ben: You sure?

Molly: I'm sure. Jack'll like it too.

Ben: Okay, then.

You shift the gears and look for a way to crawl out the school line.

CUT TO *the exterior of the high school as Molly and Ben near the entrance. FOCUS ON Ben as he slows his gait, taking in the scene at the automatic doors: Jack sits on a bench, hunched over, and a woman bends over him, her hands on his shoulders. You glance at Mom. Oh, great.*

The time bomb clicks one last time then explodes in shards of panic. Mom sprints up the steps to Jack, weaving her way around bustling teens.

Molly: Jack!

You inwardly groan as you follow Mom. Crap. Just when you thought she had handled the day pretty good too. You dodge the teenagers who now start to glance at you and the group at the doors. Great,

now you're all making a scene, and you hate scenes; you've had enough in your twenty-six years of people gawking at you and your family like you're in a movie. A kid shouts. You wince as your ears hurt.

Molly: Jack!

She squats in front of him, tenderly grabbing his head and brushing his hair from his forehead while talking way too fast. Crap, she's freaked out now. Dang it, Jack.

The woman steps back from Jack and smiles at you and Mom. You remember her. It's one of Jack's teachers. You and David ran into her when you checked out the school the other month, and she offered to show you around and answer your questions, which was nice since it was slightly awkward for two grown men to be walking about a school for little brother rather than for a kid of your own. She'd actually made it not so awkward, and you knew she'd be a good fit for Jack. Apparently, you weren't wrong. Millie, Misty, Mary, was it? Something like that.

Mary: He's all right. Just had a little scare is all.

FOCUS ON Jack. Mom touches your face and fires a volley of questions, mainly if you're okay. You wish she'd stop. Granted, her hands feel good, especially after you'd thought scary hands had you there for a moment. But students are glancing or staring at you as they pass, and they're bound to know now that you're the slow, messed up kid. Worse, Ben stares at you. And he doesn't look happy.

Your tongue's still heavy but you manage to get it to work.

Jack, mumbling: Mom. Mom, stop.

Mom must not hear you because she draws you in a tight hug, kissing the top of your head. Okay, embarrassing. But you can't deny as the lilac detergent fills your nose and her soft shirt brushes against your cheek that you've yearned for this all day because it means one thing: you're safe.

Molly: Let's go home, Jack. Come on. She helps you to your feet and wraps her arm around your waist. Still kind of embarrassing but you welcome the support because your legs still haven't left the Jello mold.

Mary Bridges taps the plastic bottle that she had you hold a few moments ago as she talks to Mom.

Mary: Just wanted you to know that I had him inhaling some lavender. It's an essential oil that calms nerves.

Mom looks over her shoulder at Mary Bridges as she guides you down the steps where Ben waits at the bottom. The sea of teenagers congregating on the steps and sidewalk as they wait in the pickup line parts to let you and Mom through. Many look at you. And you're sure many will remember you.

Molly: Thank you. For taking care of him.

Mary: Of course! I'll see you next week, Jack.

Ben nods at her with a tense smile.

Ben: Thank you. *He looks at you.* You all right, Jack?

You swallow and stare at the blacktop. You feel the irritation radiating from Ben's hands even though they're shoved in his pockets. You feel the pressure of a disappointed smile even though Ben forces a happy smile. You make yourself nod in response.

CUT TO *interior of Ben's truck. Molly and Jack sit in the back seat. Jack's head rests on her shoulder, his eyes closed. Molly has one arm wrapped around her son, her fingers stroking his hair. Her other hand rests on Jack's knee.*

FOCUS ON *Ben who glances up in the rearview mirror. You make out Mom whispering questions to figure out what happened. Did you get hurt? Did someone say something to you? Did someone do something to you? Everything she asks, Jack mumbles "no."*

You chew the inside of your cheek and tap the steering wheel, trying to cool the irritation you start to feel boil inside you. Jack keeps saying nothing happened. You almost wish something had happened to Jack. Then at least Mom would have a valid reason for her fears and the storm you and David are bound to brave tonight wouldn't have to be so violent. But if Jack panicked just to panic . . . you exhale. Come on, Ben, you know his past experiences weren't that great. His fears are . . . you sigh. Well, not logical. Understandable anyway.

CUT TO *the Griffith living room. The front door opens as the threesome file through.*

Molly and Ben in unison: Lucy, I'm home!

FOCUS ON *Jack as he smiles slightly. It's the first smile, however small, you've been able to put on all day. Because Molly and Ben cracking your family's traditional homecoming call from "I Love Lucy" (which is why Mom named her that) and the soft smell of fabric couch and pleather recliners and the sound of excited barking and ticking nails as Lucy herself bounds into the room, ears flapping behind her, all declare you're home. And home means safety.*

You drop to a squat and catch Lucy in your arms as she crashes into your chest. She licks your face over and over between barks.

Oh, boy! Oh, boy, Jack! Where've you been? How was it? Where'd you go again? Oh, boy! It's been boring with you gone. Wanna play ball? Wanna go run? Wanna skateboard? Oh, boy, am I glad you're home! Why you wearing these funny clothes? Get out of 'em and let's go play! Oh, boy!

You chuckle at her bombardment of exclamations and hold her close despite her wriggling, feeling her small body against your own, breathing in her beagle scent that David hates but you love because it all reminds you that you're home, that you're safe.

Mom calls from the kitchen where she washes her hands at the sink. You think her strange method of scrubbing all the way up to her elbows is where Ben and David get it.

Molly: *I got frozen pizzas for lunch, Jack, your favorite.*

Ben locked the door and kicked off his boots (those and basketball shoes are like the only shoes he wears), and you look up at him as he goes straight past you into the kitchen. You wish Ben would look at you.

In the truck, he never made eye contact with you. Mom had insisted she sit in the back with you, and you couldn't tell if Ben had shut the driver door a little too hard or if your ears were still on sensory overload. You hadn't meant to fall in Mom's shoulder like a wimp, but she had drawn you in and her shirt was so soft and her arms so comforting and the rumbling and AC of Ben's truck so calming, and frankly, you hadn't realized how tired you were until she held you like that. You felt beat up. You still do. You could curl up on the floor right now with Lucy and not get up until tomorrow's breakfast. In the truck, you managed to open your eyes every now and then and look up at Ben. He never once glanced back at you.

You wish now at least that Ben would make some kind of sign that he isn't angry and disappointed with you. But all of Ben's movements—from his stiff gait to the way he puts a cup into the ice maker of the fridge a little too hard—scream, "You let me down."

Lucy wriggles from your arms and bounces in front of you, yelping. She playfully bites the leg of your jeans and tugs.

Ben: *She's been waiting all morning for you. He takes a large sip of water and heads for the backdoor where he stands and stares out the window, drinking his water, biting his lower lip in between sips. Like David. David does that when he's irritated. And David's sure to hear all about today.*

Ben won't even look at you. Won't even let you see his disappointed face. Just lets you feel it. And that's so much worse.

Lucy barks and cocks her head. What's wrong with you, boy?

Yeah, what's wrong with you. Ben asked you to do one thing. Just one. And it wasn't even for him, it was for Mom who you obviously freaked out, the one thing Ben asked you not to do. Heat burns behind your eyes. No, no, you've had enough emotions for one day. You're so sick of yourself. Why can't you keep yourself together? You've been an explosion all day. Can you not just feel whole for five seconds? Just five seconds? Is that too much to ask?

Yeah, it is. The hand of emotional energy snatches your brain and winds it up like a windup car, ready to send it blasting. The heat in your eyes grows hotter.

Mom opens the freezer and pulls out two pizzas.

Molly: Wash your hands, Jack, and we'll eat.

Wash your hands. An excuse to leave.

The wind-up car releases. And we're off!

You explode from the floor and pound up the steps.

FOCUS ON Molly who stares at the empty steps, startled, and jumps slightly as an upstairs door slams shut. Lucy pads to the steps and looks up them, whining, before turning her doggy eyes to you.

Even she knows you've dropped the ball again, Molly.

You use scissors to slice open the pizza box that feels as flimsy as your voice.

Molly: He, uh . . . you clear your scratchy throat . . . he wouldn't tell me what happened. He said it was nothing but . . . really, Molly, having to clear your throat again . . . I know Jack doesn't have panic attacks over nothing.

You stare hard at the pizza toppings as you unwrap it from the plastic, hoping the heat behind your eyes will cool. You shouldn't have Ben see you like this. You shouldn't be showing him your emotions and fears. That's for a locked bathroom door as you've always done, right, Molly, girl? You almost hear the narcissist voice coo that in your ear, and you shudder, reminded of how you failed two little boys and swore, so help you God, the third would be the charm.

But obviously your charm broke. Because you don't hear Jack moving around upstairs. You don't hear loud, crazy music rattling the walls. You don't hear things dropping and bouncing from his clumsy hands. Just like you haven't heard his voice. Just like he lost it before. Just like David lost his around you not so long ago.

Molly: He's not talking to me, Ben. *That door upstairs . . . didn't David slam a door on you like that before? The letters on the second pizza box are hard to see so you blink only to have your eyes cloud again. He's not telling me what happened. He's—He's clammed up on you, Molly, that's what he is, just like David clammed up on you as a teen. And once he clammed up, not even a crowbar could break that shell open.*

You bite your lip to keep yourself from crying, "What have I done?" but you must have because you hear Ben saying, "No, Mom, it's not like that," and his hands are on your shoulders.

FOCUS ON Ben as he gently turns Molly to him and stoops a little to look at her face. You almost regret making Jack promise to hide any emotion from Mom. Not that it worked anyway, but at least Jack would be talking to Mom and she wouldn't be worrying over if she broke his trust or not. Dang it, Ben, you know that's a sensitive fear of hers with Jack after that big showdown with David in high school. And here's Jack in high school, and while you know Jack's in a reclusive hole right now to hide from Mom, she's seeing it as a breach of trust. Gosh, you are not playing the part assigned to you today.

Ben: Mom, I don't think what you think happened has happened.

Mom shakes her head, swiping at her red eyes.

Molly: You don't know Jack—

Ben: Yes, I do. *She shakes her head again and you harden your tone slightly. Mom. She looks at you. Fearful brokenness. You remember every time you've seen this look, the one that cries of failure with no way to fix the damage. You've seen it when she learned of Jack's school abuse, when she learned that Jack had dyslexia, when she learned that adolescent David couldn't be controlled, when she learned that she had to raise three boys on her own. You hate this look. You hate that she feels this look. You hate how this look makes you feel as helpless as the look itself.*

You sigh and rub her shoulders with your thumbs.

Ben, quietly: I do. Do you think Jack would let you touch him if you broke his trust?

Mom stares at you as if shocked you've read her thoughts.

You half-smile.

Ben: He practically fell on top of you, right? And you know well that Jack won't be touched if he's angry. He just doesn't want to scare you, Mom. That's all. He's trying to be brave for you. I promise.

Molly sighs and swipes at her tears.

Molly, whispering: Okay.

Ben: Now I'm going to go get him. All right?

She sniffs.

Molly: Yeah. Yeah, okay.

She turns back to the pizzas and preheats the oven with a shaky hand. Now for Jack.

CUT TO interior of upstairs bathroom. Jack sits on the edge of the shower tub, his head in his hands. You bite your lip to keep the sobs from escaping. You can at least do that, you idiot. Your insides may want tears to fall on your hot cheeks, but you refuse to let them rip through your mouth like that.

The day sucks. Royally sucks. You thought you prepared yourself for it this morning when you squeezed your neck into this suffocating collar, but you weren't prepared for the unbearable panic, the amount of people, the words dancing on the board which you still don't have which means you're going to fail, the pressure to be someone you aren't, the sheer bigness of it all. You worried Mom. You were supposed to be strong for Mom, and you weren't. She was there for you. Why weren't you there for her? David and Ben always are. You wanted to be. You tried to be. Not hard enough, you idiot.

You broke your promise to Ben. Ben trusted you. And the thing about Ben is that he never breaks his promise. Ever. You've known ever since you were a kid that if Ben promised there wasn't a monster in your closet, there wasn't, that if he promised to show up, he'd be there, that if he promised to keep a secret, not even Darth Vader's probe droid could draw it out of him. You inhale and that loosens your barrier so a sob escapes like water from a broken dam. No, stop it, baby. You bite your lip. Dam it back up.

He'll tell David now because him and David have always been like Captain Rex and Commander Cody. He'll tell him what a wimp you are so then both him and David can be disappointed in you, and David can tell both you and Mom how he had been right all along. You don't blame Ben though. You flat out deserve it.

You know he won't tell about your bathroom incident. There's some unspoken code between you and Ben that neither of you came up with yet both of you understand: if no one gets hurt, then no one tells. You don't know when the code exactly started, but you think probably back when you were like ten, and you remember fooling around with Ben over his new Food Lion uniform. (He hated working there, from what you recall, but he always said he'd do whatever he could to help Mom and David now that he had finished high school, which you thought was weird since David never seemed like he needed any help.) He pulled out the Food Lion ball cap and set it on the back of his head, making some goofy face that made you laugh and joking it was too small for his big head. You had said something about it fitting better if he'd put it on right and reached up and jerked it down on his head for him. He laughed shakily, patted your shoulder, and asked you to put his backpack in the closet.

You'd spun back around when you heard his big body crash into the wall and then slump in the corner. You hollered his name and tugged the ball cap up so you could see his face only to see his skin white as a Hoth snowstorm and his pupils dilating as round as the Death Star. You told Ben not to worry because you were gonna get Mom and Mom would help, but Ben grabbed your arm and gasped between breaths, don't tell Mom. I'm-I'm not hurt, okay? Don't-don't tell Mom.

And so the code started.

You didn't tell Mom because you figured Ben had an attack like you tended to have and was embarrassed like you tended to be. And Ben didn't tell when you panicked in the night because of it and he helped you go back to sleep, or when you threw up in the hallway because your body was learning how to function without the reds and the oranges and the pinks and Mom and David weren't there because they were buying David's car, so Ben cleaned both you and the hall up and said don't worry, I won't tell.

And today, Ben had trusted you just like you had trusted him. Ben wanted you to do this not for himself but for Mom. Ben needed your help like you needed Ben's help, so why couldn't you be there for your brother this time? You're sorry. You didn't mean to panic. You didn't want to panic. But you can't tell Ben that, can you? Ben won't understand. Ben doesn't understand now. Ben'll just be angry at you for failing him, disappointed that you broke their promise.

How come you're always the one needing support? You hate it. You hate it so much. You hate it so much that you scream to yourself "I hate you!" like Anakin screaming his hatred at Obi-Wan. You hate being the center of attention, of being needy, of being sensitive, of—

A knock on the door.

Crap, Mom's come after you.

Jack: Hold on!

You hurry to the sink and flip the faucet, splashing water on your face to cool your cheeks and hide the tears. If Mom sees you like this, she'll flip out and you'll ruin the day even more. If that's possible. Yeah, probably possible with you. You take a deep breath as you shut off the water. Pull it together, dude. You open the door.

Ben.

Ben: Can I talk to you for a second?

The disappointment dangles on each of Ben's words, slapping your face. It's worse than seeing it in his eyes.

You stare at the tile floor. You can't keep Ben's gaze. The disappointment hits so hard, it rouses the heat in your cheeks again. You nod instead.

FOCUS ON Ben as he scratches the back of his head. *You wish Jack would say something. You can't take Jack to his room. Jack'll think you're there to lecture him. Guess they could just stand here in the doorway but it feels too awkward. You sigh and point to the side of the tub.*

Ben: Just . . . just sit there.

FOCUS ON Jack as he grabs his shaking arm and sits on the tub's edge. *Here it comes. Ben's going to ask you what happened, he'll tell, and Ben will think you overreacted and are weak. No matter how sorry you are, no matter how hard you try to explain it, that is what Ben will think. Who wouldn't?*

Ben gradually lowers himself next to you gripping the side of the wall. He winces and sticks out his long legs with a sigh.

Ben: This actually hurts my knees. *He forces a chuckle.*

You smile slightly. Gotta admit, this looks pretty funny, you two sitting on the side of the tub with Ben's knees about jacked up to his chest and his long legs pushing against the bottom of the sink.

Ben folds his hands. Folded hands. Cue: It's time for a talk.

Ben: All right. Why'd you panic?

You dig your nails into your elbow's skin. Ben is irritated, you can tell. It's why he's so abrupt. Usually, he eases into the conversation rather than demanding an answer right away.

Ben: If no one said or did anything to you, why . . . why freak out?

Freak out. Why is Ben so uncaring, so distant right now? He makes it sound like you wanted to panic, that you didn't try. He doesn't know how you felt. He doesn't know what it was like to see the fuzzy, messed up words, to watch everyone finish before you, to remember that heavy textbook whacking your head. He doesn't know what it's like to be cast off as the wrong shape in a thousand-piece jigsaw puzzle. But you broke your promise. So you deserve to not fit in the puzzle.

FOCUS ON Ben. *You realize your mistake. Bad word choice. You sigh and rub your eyes. You're letting Mom's and Jack's emotions rub off on you. You need to be more understanding. Isn't that why you volunteered to stay behind instead of David? You sound like him now with how bluntly you phrased your two questions. You chuckle internally at that thought. Boy-howdy are you glad David wasn't here today.*

FOCUS ON Jack. *You bite your lip, feeling a cry rise in your throat. Ben is so frustrated. He can't even talk to you. He can't even voice his thoughts properly, that's how angry he is with you. He wants an answer. The cry rises higher and higher in your throat, pounding on the dam, threatening to break through. Ben wants an answer. No, you can't answer because you'll show how weak you are again. He wants an answer. No, your answer isn't what he wants to hear. But Ben wants an answer. No, don't answer. But Ben—Don't!—*

The dam breaks.

You drop your head in your hands. The words pour out hot and fast as the cry tears your throat.

Jack: I couldn't read, okay? I couldn't read the assignment. Yeah, I-I freaked out. I didn't even finish the dang assignment and now I don't have my homework because it was all backwards and—and—*You taste salt. Would your dang voice stop its baby bird squawking? So, you lower your voice, hoping to hide its cracking.* I'm sorry I let you down.

Ben: No, you didn't—*You stop. Yeah, you've kind of given that vibe, haven't you? You tried to make things easier for Mom but in the process you made it worse for Jack. Worse, you didn't even think about him, Ben. When you saw him outside the school, you didn't once wonder if he was actually hurt or mentally dazed like he used to be. You've always been the big brother toting little brother around, looking out for him. Some sign of concern would've been Jack's sign you were okay with him, and you didn't give him that sign.*

You sigh and push up your ball cap. You hopped on Mom and Jack's emotional rollercoaster rather than controlled it. Well, let's see if you can at least slow the ride down now.

Ben, quietly: I'm sorry too, Jack. *You put a hand on his shoulder. Look, I'm not disappointed, okay? Jack, look at me. Jack slowly raises his head. You make sure to focus on his red eyes. I'm not disappointed. I promise.*

FOCUS ON Jack. *You swallow. He's not? You thought for sure he was. But one thing about Ben, if he promises . . .*

Ben: I missed you today, bud. Didn't feel right being home without you here.

You smile a little. You were missed. By more than Lucy. That's good to know. Good to know you weren't the only one longing to get back, longing to feel normal and safe again.

Ben: Wanna go for a run tonight? After it cools off a bit?

You nod and rub your nose. Yeah, a run would be good. You like the evening runs with Ben around the block or on the beach. Gets your energy out and gives Ben the exercise he says he needs, as if he's not

fit enough climbing houses all day. And right now, you've got so much energy, so many thoughts to get rid of. You need to run out of your mind.

Ben: And we'll fix your homework. We have the whole weekend to catch up. Your teachers know about you, they'll understand. I'll get it fixed, I promise. *He half-smiles and squeezes your shoulder.*

You manage to mimic Ben's half-smile. If Ben promises it'll be fixed, you darn sure know it will.

Ben slaps his hands on his thighs with a sigh.

Ben: Now, I don't know about you, but I'm starving.

You smile as you wipe your cheeks with the back of your hand.

Jack: Yeah, a little.

Ben grabs the tub wall again with his left hand and presses down on the edge with his right. He winces.

Ben: How do you even get down here—dang! *He launches himself up and stumbles into the counter.*

You can't help but laugh.

Ben: Okay. *He winces as he straightens, bending and unbending his knees.*

You smirk.

Jack: You okay? Aren't you, uh, a little young for this?

Ben smiles as he rubs his kneecaps.

Ben: Don't mock this.

Jack: You kind of are old though. Older than me. Grunt like an old man anyways.

You start to mimic the sound of Ben trying to get out of a chair, but he playfully grabs your shoulder and shoves you out the door.

Ben: Yeah, who's going to kick your butt on a run.

Jack: Sure thing, creaky knees.

And you pound down the stairs as Ben chases you so he can whack you with his ball cap. Yeah, you're home.

CUT TO night in the Griffith living room. A couple lamps on the side tables warm the room. Ben and Jack share the couch. Both of them wear relaxed t-shirts and pajama bottoms. Their hair is damp. Ben sits in a corner, reading a book. Jack curls up in the other corner, listening to music through his earbuds, drumming the couch arm with his fingers, staring at nothing in particular. Lucy snuggles up on the couch between them, her head rested in Jack's lap.

The front door unlocks.

Ben and Lucy look up as David enters.

FOCUS ON David. *You fight a yawn as you give the typical call that it's you at the door.*

David: Hey, it's me.

Ben smiles and nods. Jack stares off in the distance, fingers drumming the couch. Lucy yawns and smacks her jowls with an indifferent stare.

You lock the door and share a glance with Ben. All right, today didn't go so well.

David: Seems like a lively Friday night.

Ben half-smiles. Obviously trying to make light of a situation that probably wasn't so light.

Ben: Yeah, I think we're all a little tired tonight. Kind of been a long day.

You ditch the briefcase and keys on the side table by the door. Kick off the shoes and slide them under the table.

David: Yeah, same.

Mom's voice calls from the back of the house.

Molly: Dinner's in the microwave!

David: 'Kay! *You walk into the living room. Hey, Jack.*

Ben taps Jack's arm. Jack looks up, startled, and takes out his earbuds as he notices you. Tuned into a galaxy far, far away rather than on tonight's station. Usually what happens when he's got earbuds in: zoned out.

David: Hey, pal. How was it? Good?

Jack scratches Lucy's neck. Avoiding your gaze. Obvious.

Jack, quietly: It was, it was fine.

Yeah-huh. You glance at Ben. 'Kay, what happened?

Ben tilts his head right and left. Eh, it was so-so.

Meaning Jack was stuck in his head and Mom was over emotional. Right?

Yeah, I guess you could say that.

A'ight. Nothing we can't work them through.

You look at Jack and slap your hands together.

David: All right, cool deal. Wanna hear all about it. Soon as I get some food. I'm starved. *You head into the kitchen and drop the empty cooler bag on the center island as Mom enters, scrunching her wet hair with a towel.*

Molly: Hey, hon. How was your day?

All right, cold shoulder from this morning gone. Day possibly wasn't too bad after all. Or she's already chewed Ben out and you're just waiting for the next gale. Guess you'll find out.

You wash your hands at the sink, scrubbing up to the elbows.

David: Good. What you got this time for me, Mom?

Molly: Chicken alfredo. *She opens the microwave and takes out a plate.* There's some carrot sticks in the fridge too.

You smirk as you dry your hands on a towel.

David: Chicken alfredo? What, no new recipe concoction? Stepped it up a notch.

Mom smiles as she puts a bottle of ranch and a bowl from the fridge.

Molly: Well, it was first day.

You open a drawer and rummage for a fork. Still haven't figured out why there's so much silverware for four people.

David: Wish it was my first day if it means we get to eat like this.

Ben leans over and calls into the kitchen.

Ben: That's what I said.

Mom shakes her head.

Molly: Really? *She slides the plate of pasta to you and squirts ranch in the bowl. Here.*

David: Geez, how many carrots you think I can eat?

Molly: I need these eaten. And you need some vegetables. They're good for you.

David: I see just fine. Give 'em to Ben. He's the one with contacts. *You take a bite of cold pasta.*

Mom smirks and shoves the bowl in your hand.

Molly: Oh, I forgot to heat that up.

David: Too hungry for that anyway. It's great, Mom, really. Thanks. *You kiss her cheek and head into the living room.*

Mom returns to her room.

Molly, calling: I'll be back.

You sink into the easy chair and put the carrot bowl on the ottoman.

David: Okay. How—

Lucy pads over and stands on her hind legs, resting her front paws on your knee. She smiles up at you with a slight whine.

David: So now you want to love on me. Sorry, sweetheart, you're not charming me tonight. *Jack chuckles and Ben smirks. Help yourself to the carrots.*

Jack pats his lap.

Jack: Here, Lucy, come on, girl.

Lucy barks and shakes her head at you before bounding into Jack's lap. Dumb dog.

David: So. First day. It was good, right?

FOCUS ON Jack as Lucy nestles her head in his shoulder. *You hold Lucy close, rubbing your nose against her fur, avoiding David's gaze. He already wants you to say it was good. He expects it. He doesn't want to hear anything else.*

Ben closes his book.

Ben: We had a bit of a rough start.

All right, he's gonna help you out.

David pushes his pasta with his fork before taking another bite.

David: Anybody say something to you?

You scratch Lucy's head. You're glad she's sitting on your lap. She hides your bouncing knee. You know where this is going. Here comes David trying to prove that you're stuck inside your head, that you're the one with the problem, that you should suck it up because David's right about you going to school and that's the end of it.

Jack, quietly: No.

David: Anybody do something?

Jack: No.

FOCUS ON David. Ben glances at you. Easy, man.

He's gotta talk, Ben. Can't keep doing all the talking for him.

I know, just . . . take it easy.

Sorry, Ben, gotta do this for him.

You lean forward slightly.

David: You got to talk to me, pal. Was it all mental? Stuck in your head today?

FOCUS ON Jack. Lucy squirms in your lap. No, Lucy! You try to hold onto her, but she takes off into the kitchen. Your knee bounces freely now. You swallow and focus on how many threads are in the couch cushions as David keeps staring at you.

Jack: Yeah.

David: Well, that's good, right? Means you can get rested over the weekend and be ready for it Monday.

You bring your leg to your chest to stop your bouncing knee. Now you need something to stop your twitching fingers. "Be ready for it next week . . ." Of course. There's no changing David's mind. He's set on you going back. He's set on not understanding.

You grab your earbuds and rub an earpiece between your fingers. There.

Jack: Yeah.

The sounds of Lucy lapping water and the squish of pasta fill the tense silence that settles in the room.

FOCUS ON David as he chews slowly. *Well, you've got to get Jack to talk. Prove it's not that bad.*

Education is a must, not a want. Jack's got to adjust either way. Perhaps if you change the tactics. Keep it on school but not focused on Jack personally.

David: Did you do anything today?

Ben: He got some homework.

David: Homework? What kind?

FOCUS ON Jack as he glances at Ben. *Okay, that's not helping, Ben. What's he doing? Does he want David to know about your panic attack? Does he want David to get frustrated that you didn't finish because you flipped out? Is that what he's building up to? You thought they weren't going to bring this up, at least not now.*

But Ben looks at you, his eyes telling you it's your turn to answer this time.

You press the earpiece harder. So far, you've counted thirty-nine stitches in the couch.

Jack: English. We-we copied words that we're supposed to learn. From history. Or something like that.

Ben: Like a bed wrench.

David: Bed wrench? *He smirks.* Is that for when a fat guy comes around? Tighten a few loose screws.

You smile. Okay, that was kind of funny.

David mischievously glances at Ben.

David: 'kay, now I'm thinking of a crude joke. *He chuckles to himself which makes you grin despite your previous anxiety. David's jokes are usually pretty good.*

Ben smirks.

Ben: Okay, not in front of the kid.

David: Honeymoon too rough?

Ben bites back a smile.

Ben: David.

David: Come on, man, that was the extreme mild version of what I was thinking. *He smirks as he sets his empty plate aside.* I'll you later.

Ben: Rather you didn't.

David looks at you and smirks again. You bite back a grin, knowing he's got another joke to crack. Probably "milder" now, though the edgy ones are pretty good because the borderline sketchiness of them that makes Ben and Mom fake exasperation is what makes them funny.

David: Could be for light sleepers. You leave a wrench by the bed, and if the person beside you doesn't fall asleep "wham!" *He mimics slamming a wrench down.*

You laugh at the sound effect and the imagery.

Jack: Wait, don't you twist stuff with a wrench? It's not a hammer.

Ben sighs as he kicks his feet up on the ottoman and winks at you.

Ben: What'd you expect from the guy who just sells the equipment instead of uses it? Might wanna brush up on your knowledge, David.

Jack: Burn.

David: I'll let you know when I need the input, Bob-the-Builder.

You laugh so hard your head smacks the back of the couch. Ben chuckles and shakes his head at you.

Ben: You're too easily amused Jack.

David: Or he's punch-drunk.

You're both, you know it. The day's been crazy exhausting. But that's one thing about David: he knows it too so he plays up on it. Because that's the other thing about David that you've put together as you've grown up with him: he likes making people laugh. And yet another thing about both your brothers is that when Captain Rex and Commander Cody get on a roll, not even a droid seismic tank can stand against them. It's like they step out on a joke court and pass the ball back and forth, the object of the game being who can keep the ball going the longest. David usually dribbles the best.

Ben passes.

Ben: Maybe you pinch someone's nose with it. For snorers.

David catches.

David: Snore no more.

You chuckle and join the game. Frankly, you don't remember how this started or what you were even talking about to begin with, and you don't care. This is way more fun.

Jack: Maybe it's a weapon. For when someone sneaks up on you when you sleep.

Ben: Wouldn't they just use a gun or knife?

David: And rouse suspicion? Who'd suspect a guy with a wrench? Talk about concealed carry.

Ben: Oh, true.

David: Or it could be for whacking bedbugs. They had a lot of those back then.

Ben: Unless we're looking at the word *bed* wrong. Maybe it means something else. Like a truck bed.

David: A truck bed? Really? Thought we were working with history. You become a time traveler?

You laugh and your brothers grin.

Mom walks into the living room holding Lucy.

Molly: What are you boys laughing about?

David: Bed wrenches. Their functions are endless. Care for one? For your birthday? Mother's Day?

Ben: You'd like it.

Jack: They're great, Mom.

David: It'd suit you.

Mom stares at you all, brow scrunched in a hilarious mixture of confusion, surprise, and yep, these are my sons.

This time, all three of you burst into laughter and you double over.

Jack: Her face.

Mom smirks and shakes her head as she sits in the recliner, and though she doesn't say it, you practically hear her famous line, "You boys."

Yeah, you're home.

Nine

What Ballcaps and Treehouses Have in Common

SCENE OPENS in Ben's bedroom. The room is completely dark except for the windowsill where a faint, gray glow of very early morning light pokes through the blinds' cracks. FOCUS ON Ben who lies in bed and drags his hands across his face.

Another thing bed wrenches do: they wrench open the rusty nails of your memory box right when you want to sleep.

It's not that you can't sleep. It's that your body won't sleep. And there's a big difference, you've learned. Can't sleep is when you're not tired. Won't sleep is when, though your eyes grind because they're so heavy and your limbs numb because they're too exhausted to move, your mind shouts that you'll stay awake.

More like your memory box shouts you'll stay awake.

You've had that memory box for a while now, haven't you? It's a good thing. For a while, you couldn't figure out what to do with all those memories lying around your mind's room, their sheer number overflowing the dresser drawers and their sheer weight throwing open the closet doors despite how hard you leaned against them. So you decided to declutter, clear out. The dad did good teaching you how to clean and stay clean, after all. Shoes off as soon as you enter the house and lined up neatly like little soldiers. Hands scrubbed all the way up to the elbows to rid you of harmful germs. Bed sheets straightened, pillowcases taunt, loose clothes and shoes put up out of sight and out of mind.

Out of sight and out of mind. That's the line from the dad that saved you. You finally remembered it in high school when you got tired of jumping at every sound, got tired of being picked on, got tired of being beat up 'cause you were the kid that didn't fight back. If you put the memories out of sight, they'd be out of your mind and all the scaredy-catiness would go away. You'd finally be normal. You'd finally be like everybody else. You'd finally fight back.

You built a box. You've always been good at building things. Picked out some nice, thick boards and some sturdy, long nails. Even got a sander to smooth out any splinters that might get caught in your brain and scratch open the tiniest of scabs. You emptied every drawer, shelf, and corner, and even threw out the rug so nothing could be swept under it. Everything you found got shoved in that box. It was your best deep-clean. Not even a speck of dust was left. The dad would've been proud. You were. It was a well-made box, if you said so yourself.

It was a good thing, that box. With a clean room, you had space to breathe. With a decluttered room, you had space to put in new things, better things, things that you liked. You even replaced a few of the closet shelves with ones you built yourself. You've always been good at building things. You had a normal room in a normal mind in a normal body. No one picked on Ben Griffith anymore. No one recognized Ben Griffith anymore. Not even a memory. When you started working for Ray four years back, it got even better. You learned how to construct houses from the bottom up. So you completely gutted your room, reframed the interior, replaced the decaying, splintered wood with sturdy, new boards that could keep a house upright in a raging hurricane.

Yeah, the box was a good thing. But the thing about building boxes sturdy enough to keep a boggart inside is that they are heavy. You can't pick them up and carry them from the room. If you'd known that when you built it, you'd have built it outside. And then blown it up with some dynamite. But you couldn't shoulder the box so you couldn't even hide it in the furthest corner of the attic. The only thing you could do was throw your whole weight against it and shove it under your bed. Out of sight, out of mind.

Except when the bed wrenches come. Your memory box is pretty full. It took a lot of nails hammered with a lot of brute force and a lot of rage to keep the top on, and even then, you could still hear the muffled sobs of the little boy trapped inside. Which is why you threw your whole weight against it and shoved it under your bed and let it collect dust. But every now and then, a bed wrench comes and pries off one of the many nails so a sob slips out and joins the dust under the bed.

Like now. You moan as you swing your numb legs over the edge of the bed. They're heavier than your eyelids. But even though your body is paralyzed, your hands aren't anyway. They hear the voices sneaking out the box. That's why they shake. And that's why you snatch the ball cap off your nightstand and squeeze it until your fingers poke holes through the worn mesh fibers. You've discovered over the years that gripping something usually stops the shaking. But not the voices leaking from the box.

The yelling. It never stopped. The dad never stopped roaring at Mom, never stopped bellowing at David, never stopped shouting at you. Shouting through you. Like that one time the dad spun you around so hard your teeth snapped together and you tasted blood, and he shouted through your ear so loud your eardrums thundered a deafening beat fit for the goblins of Moria. He shouted straight in your ear like it was a megaphone, as if the words could go in one ear and out the other. You learned most of your vocabulary that way. Until Mom whispered, tears in her eyes, "Hon, don't say that," or a teacher reprimanded you and sent you home with a note. Then you learned that vocabulary was bad, that you should let it go in one ear and out the other like the dad wanted.

That's why you started wearing ball caps. They gave you a heads up when the dad came around because one of his favorite things was to jerk it down over your eyes. No more sneaking up and shouting in your ear. It'd burn your forehead when he yanked it like that. But at least he couldn't whack

your head like David's since he'd have to take the time to swipe it off. And at least he stopped yelling through you like a megaphone.

You finger the frayed edge of the ball cap. You retrieved it from the corner before getting in bed. After you showered, you purposefully tossed it aside and made yourself not care where it fell, trying to break, as you've tried hundreds of times before, the foolish urge for orderliness. The foolish urge to even wear a ball cap. That idea failed. Even though you know it's foolish. Even though you know that the ball cap isn't going to cause any harm sitting in the corner. Even though you know the dad is not here to berate Mom for forgetting a spot, not here to remind you of what a disobedient, lousy piece of . . . yeah. Even though you know that you don't have to wear ball caps anymore. In fact, after you gutted the room, you tried not wearing them. Funny thing was, every job you had made wearing ball caps hell of convenient. So, like an annoying fly, the idea of the ball cap sitting in the corner buzzed in the back of your mind all night until you finally flung back the covers and got it. Thought that would've helped you sleep. Better luck next time, Ben.

In one ear and out the other is what the dad wanted. It's what you've wanted. Problem was the words didn't go out. Not the reminders anyway of who you were and what you were made of and why your very existence hung on the dad's existence. Those stayed. Trapped in your ringing ears. Caught on the skin of your eardrum. Tangled in the cobwebs of your brain. You didn't want them to stay. But they stayed.

You've been holding your breath. Fool. It's okay to breathe now, remember? It's been okay to breathe for nearly fifteen damn years. You exhale and bend the brim of your ball cap. It creaks from the pressure. If it snaps, good riddance. That'll keep you from putting it back on your head.

You'll just grab another one, Ben. You always do. Another sob from the box under your bed. Crap, no. You don't want to hear that. You shoved that boy in the box years ago to get him to shut up. The bed wrench must have pried open another nail. Get it to stop. No more cries from the little boy.

It's okay, Ben.

Another voice from the box. You bite back one of those vocabulary words the dad taught you and squeeze the brim tighter. It creaks again. Like your lungs creak. Which is why your chin is now on your chest as you force yourself to take another deep breath. David has always said that: It's okay, Ben. He's never stopped saying it. You hate it. Hate it worse than the memories you crammed in the box with that baby of a boy.

Because it always reminds you that you are what the dad always said you were. A helpless piece of shit. David said his classic phrase tonight. When Mom and Jack had sacked out for the night, you and David hung back in the living room. You filled him in on the missing details of the day's events. At the end, he

cracked some joke about you working late hours without pay. And that's when you shifted the conversation from report to Q+A.

Looks like you did too.

He glanced at you.

When'd they start working you after five?

He caught on but dodged the play. New job's got weird hours.

Does it? Thought you said getting clients from them was like pulling teeth. When'd that change?

David shifted his gaze to the floor and rubbed his jaw. Because you both knew that whatever he'd say would be a lie.

You leaned forward. David—

You hadn't seen him get out of chair that fast in a good while. Look, I'm tired—

If it's about him—

His head snapped back as hard as his voice. It's okay, Ben. Got it? He sighed and scratched the back of his neck.

You averted your gaze to your knees. Yeah, got it.

David left, rubbing his jaw.

Yeah, you got it all right. You got it like you've always gotten that David only rubs his jaw when he's thinking about those terrible wires, and you got that David only thinks about those terrible wires when he remembers the man who forged them. And you got like you've always gotten that when David remembers the man who forged them, he stays out. Where he goes or what he does you still haven't gotten, but what you have so clearly gotten like you've always gotten is how helpless you are.

A helpless piece of shit.

...

You really want a magic treehouse.

That's what you think watching the rain drip down the living room window. If you had a magic treehouse, you could read outside like you always do. The outside has no walls. The outside has no doors.

The outside has no doors and no walls that aren't good at keeping noise in.

The dad and Mommy—no, Mom—are at it again in the kitchen. Don't say Mommy, Ben. The dad said that's what babies do. He said that he stopped calling his mom Mommy when he was like three, and you're like eight, so you need to man up. You're not a baby, are you, Ben?

You curl up tighter on the couch and burrow your nose further into your book. It's a good book, your favorite kind because it's about magic, and books about real life are boring. The front page says it's part of a really long series, which you're glad about because that means you have more to read. You really like this series, the one about a boy named Jack and a girl named Annie and a magic treehouse they find that takes them on all sorts of magical adventures in different places, times, even worlds. That's also why you want a magic treehouse. To go to a different world.

And you bet the walls of a magic treehouse are nice and thick, thick enough to block out loud voices.

Like the ones you hear right now.

You try to ignore them and lose yourself in the magic tree house again. But it's hard to read when the voices are so loud. Mommy—Mom asks the dad why he won't take her to the doctor. She made sure to schedule her appointment when he'd be home. He asks her if he's the one carrying the damn kid, which you think is weird to ask since no one can carry Baby right now because Baby is in Mommy's—Mom's tummy. Then Mommy—Mom gets really loud the way she does when she's trying not to cry and says something like, I didn't want the damn kid! And you round your shoulders and tuck your head deep inside them and pull the book closer to your face because Mommy-Mom gets really loud and says bad words when she's trying not to cry, and that means the dad gets really loud too. And if the dad gets really loud too, then he comes out really loud. And you really don't want him to see you if he comes out here really loud.

But the dad doesn't get really loud. He just talks. You know I got lots of work to catch up on, Molly girl. I'll go with you next time.

You almost don't hear Mommy—Mom this time which means she's crying. I'll at least take the boys.

You like that idea because you're almost finished with this book and really want the next one, and Mommy-Mom (stop saying Mommy, Ben!) can stop by the library so you can find it. But you don't poke your head around your book and ask. Because you know the dad doesn't like if someone speaks to him

if he doesn't talk to you first because it is rude to speak unless spoken to because you can make people forget what they were gonna say or interrupt or say something dumb that makes you look dumb, all of which are very bad things so the dad is right that you stay quiet unless spoken to.

The dad says something about how his Molly girl needs a break, and his voice gets all soft and quiet like it does when he's not angry. He says something about his Molly being a good girl and how good of a mama she is and how much he loves her, which you think is strange since he made her cry at breakfast today because she forgot to take the brown flakes off his eggs and actually makes her cry a lot. It sounds like he kisses her too.

Then Mommy-Mom is kissing your head and saying she'll be back in a bit, and you ask her if you can come, and she says not today, and before you can tell her that you've almost finished your book and really need to find out where Jack and Annie will go next in the treehouse because they have to collect all the medallions if they're going to break the spell, she kisses you again and says she'll be back in a bit and goes out the door. Okay. Maybe you can ask her when she gets back.

It's stopped raining. You can read outside now, right? You peek over your book. The dad is going into his room to do work. He's still here. He doesn't like wet shoes in the house so you can't go out. And he doesn't like you barefoot because dirt and germs get on your feet and you'll bring that inside so you still can't go out. You sigh because you realize you were holding your breath. You like the Saturdays when the dad is not here better. Mom doesn't cry at all when he's not here, just bites her knuckle and looks at the clock a lot, which isn't bad because she's just making sure she makes the meals on time so you and David won't be hungry. David plays basketball with you when he's not here and makes you laugh, and you can even make David laugh sometimes too. You go outside when he's not here and don't hold your breath until your chest hurts.

And you wish again you had a magic treehouse too. Then you could read whenever and wherever you wanted, maybe even in a magic castle like where Jack and Annie went one time. And you could take David and Mommy-Mom with you so you could always play basketball and laugh and not watch clocks because you and David wouldn't be hungry. But you don't have a magic treehouse. And the dad is here. Doing very important work on his computer in his room, which is why he shut the door which means you have to be very quiet.

That won't be a problem because you're reading about Jack and Annie anyway. This part is getting good too. Oh, no, the samurai has snuck up on Jack. Jack's hiding, Jack's remembering what the ninja taught him and is curling up into a ball to hide. Curl up tight, Jack. Curling up tight makes you unseen. You know that very well yourself—

ANSWER ME WHEN I TALK TO YOU!

You jump from the thunderclap only to be shoved back down from a lightning bolt as your ball cap jerks down your head. Another thunderclap immediately follows.

What did we say, huh? WHAT DID WE SAY ABOUT ANSWERING ME?

The dad slaps the paperback from your hand. It flutters to the floor. Your ears drum, drum, drum, and you're holding your breath again because any noise will make him angrier. Don't look at him. He doesn't like to be looked at. Don't look—

The dad yanks your ball cap up, scraping your forehead. Look at me when I talk to you, boy!

He wants you to look at him. But looking at him makes him angry, and he definitely is angry now. If you look, he'll get even angrier, and if he gets even angrier, he'll shout through your ear. You've seen him squeeze Mommy's-Mom's wrists when he's this angry. You've seen him hurt David when he's this angry. You really don't want to be squeezed or hurt.

But he sounds like he's angry at you for not looking at him. What are you supposed to do? What does he want? Does he really want you to look at him, or is he just angry and saying things? Mommy-no, Mom, says that the dad often says things he doesn't really mean when he's angry. Is this an often?

I SAID LOOK AT ME!

You gasp as you're jerked off the couch and planted on your feet so hard that your spine burns. But you will only recall later that your spine even burned because you feel only one thing right now: the dad's big hand gripping your arm.

And the first kind of shaking starts.

You really want it to stop because if the dad feels you shaking, that might make him angrier. But you have to grip something to get the shaking to stop—your book, your knees, your ball cap, anything. But your book lies in the corner. (Will you be able to find your place?) You can't touch your knees because the dad grips your arm. You can't grip your ball cap because the dad just shoved it up and will be very, very angry if you reach for it. Why didn't the ninja teach Jack what to do if a samurai gripped him? Sure, you know to curl up, but what happens if you're actually being held? What then?

You gotta stop the shaking. So, you hold your breath.

You hold your breath and tense up your muscles and slowly cock your head. This way, you're looking up at the dad but also not looking up at him. He can see your face but not fully, and you can look down if you need to.

And you really want to look down. Because his face is so twisted, so red, so scary looking that you suddenly feel like you need to use the bathroom.

And the second kind of shaking starts.

When I call you, what are you supposed to do?

WHAT ARE YOU SUPPOSED TO DO?

Your teeth clatter. You're not sure what hurts worse: your teeth or the way your neck snapped when he shook you like that. Either way, one of them makes your voice clatter too.

C-come.

And why didn't ya?

WHY DIDN'T YA?

I-I didn't—

You didn't what? What?

Didn't-didn't hear—

You didn't hear me?

N-n-nod.

Bull shit.

Hon-honest—

Honest? Honest like your mommy, huh?

You thought you weren't supposed to say mommy. And Mommy—Mom is always honest so yes, you guess so. But something about the way the dad says it like he's spitting out something makes you think that he doesn't mean it nicely.

The dad shoves you back. You crash into the arm of the couch. You gasp which means you made a noise and let go of your breath, so you take another deep breath and hold it so you'll stop making

noises. *Your chest hurts. You hope it's thick enough to keep the dad from hearing how loud your heart is right now. It almost hurts your ears. You notice how big the dad is. He's always been big, you know, but right now, he looks even bigger than ever, as if he swallowed some kind of enchanted potion that made him grow twice his size. You really have to use the bathroom.*

Honest like your mommy, huh? He sighs and rolls his shoulders. All right. Pick a fist.

It's the old fist game. You've seen it played before. The dad plays it when someone's done something wrong and that someone needs to be punished. But the dad always plays this game with David, not you. You don't know how to play. Well, you know how because you've seen it played so many times, but you don't know how it feels to play and you've never wanted to know. You step back from the couch as the big, scary dad towers over you, fists extended for you to touch. Those fists are so big, so thick, so heavy, so hard—you know because you've seen what they do to David. Please, please no. You don't want him to touch you with those fists. You don't want him to hurt you.

The big, scary dad smirks. Are you playing it right after all?

Come on. He rubs his knuckles against your cheek. You gasp and recoil, take another step back because those knuckles feel so rough, so hard, so heavy. Please, no. You don't want him to touch you. You don't want him to hurt you.

Pick a fist. The big, scary dad brushes his opposite fist on your left cheek. You ram into the wall. Oh, no, you're trapped. The big, scary dad leers over you. The cold, hard wall that's not thick enough to keep out any noise presses against your back. You try not to make any noise but your breath keeps escaping. You have to keep inhaling faster and sharper to make it stop. You shrink against the wall, hoping it'll soften and swallow you. Please, no. You don't want him to touch you. You don't want him to hurt you.

You really, really have to use the bathroom now. Just like you really, really didn't hear him call for you. You would've come immediately, gotten him whatever he wanted, even if that meant crawling like he showed you through the dark crawl space that you don't like to get him one of his brown bottles because that's where he hides them since Mommy-Mom doesn't like that color and he doesn't want her to see them and get upset about the color. You really, really want to tell him that. But your throat really, really closes up.

The big, scary dad stares down at you. His face twists even more. His voice hardens. He won't say it again.

Pick a fist.

No. No, please. You've seen what these fists do. You've heard what these fists do. You don't want him to do it to you. You don't want him to hurt you. You need to swallow because your throat closes up, but you can't swallow because you're trying hard to stop gasping and hold your breath. Warm drops of water splash on your cheeks. Salt falls in your mouth.

The big, scary dad draws back his right wrist.

Please, don't—

A hand slaps the big, scary dad's left fist.

David.

David rushes up. David picks the big scary dad's left fist like always does. No, David, don't! He'll hurt you, he'll—

David looks at you. His chest rises and falls like he's been running, his hands shake like yours, and like you just did, he speaks with his eyes.

It's okay, Ben. Don't move.

And even though the big, scary father turns towards him, towers over him, swallows his small frame with just half his shadow, David faces him. Chest thumping, hands shaking, but he still faces him. He meets the dad's gaze with dark eyes, doesn't even blink. He too balls his hands into fists.

The big, scary dad chuckles. What's this now?

David charges.

A scuffle. You don't know what all happens because you're shrunk against the wall and the big, scary dad's frame takes up your view. There's grunting, feet slipping on the living room rug, dodging. David throws punches at the big, scary dad and says words you know Mommy-Mom said not to say. The big, scary dad chuckles as he weaves in and out of reach, tells David Come on and keep saying those words Mommy-Mom said not to say. And then David's fists land real low on the big, scary dad. And the big, scary dad stops chuckling. His big, scary face gets scarier, and his big, scary mouth says a big, scary word, and his big, scary fist rams into David's stomach.

David doubles over. Gasps for the air stolen from him, winces as if breathing hurts. His pupils widen as he keeps gasping, gasping, gasping for air, but each breath must hurt because his gasps are short like he can't breathe. He tries to straighten but that must hurt too. He stumbles, falls onto the floorboards.

No, no, no! You run to David because you don't want the wall to suck you in anymore and touch his shoulders, trying to help him sit up. Or at least you think you do. You can't see because there's too much water in your eyes.

David gasps and gasps and gasps. Chokes. Coughs. No, no, not this again. Not him hurt again. Not him broken again. What if he can't breathe again? What if he can't get any more air again?

The big, scary dad grunts as he straightens, rubbing his lower area. Just got the wind knocked out of him, he says.

And he leaves.

Wait, he's leaving? He can't leave—you need help. Mom's not here to help David. You don't know what to do. What if David can't breathe again? What if David doesn't get air again?

Wait, please—

No, stop, Ben. David brushes your hands back.

Stop what? Stop touching him? Stop calling for help?

David shoves his feet into the floor and pushes himself up, scooting back against the couch. He grips his stomach, groans, then winces as if the groan hurts too.

It's your fault. You were the one told to pick a fist, not David. You were the one who didn't hear the big, scary dad, not David. You were the one reading the book, not David. You were the one who deserved to be punished, not David. And you're so sorry. You're sorry David got hurt. You're sorry this happened. You didn't mean for this to happen. You didn't mean for the big, scary dad to change his mind about who to punish. David shouldn't have picked the fist for you. Why? Why did he do that for you?

That's what you try to say anyway. But you don't. You can't. You're crying too hard, you're blubbering. All you whimper over and over like a broken record is David, David, David.

David gasps, winces, looks at you. It's okay, Ben. It's okay.

No, it's not okay. David, I'm sorry. David, I'm sorry I didn't do it. David, I'm sorry you got hurt. David, I'm sorry I didn't take what was rightfully mine.

But none of that comes out. All you squeeze out through the tears and the trembles choking you is David, David, David.

And David keeps saying as he chokes and coughs, as he winces and groans, It's okay, Ben. It's okay.

...

You helpless piece of shit.

You resist the urge to shove the ballcap on your head though your hands beg you to let it hide you. Damn, your chest hurts and you're lightheaded. Because damn it, Ben, you're holding your breath like you're the helpless little kid again. But that's how you feel, isn't it? That's who you really are, isn't it?

Too bad the boards of your box weren't built with the kind of wood from the magic treehouse. You bet those boards were nice and thick. They'd have kept in or out any sound or memory.

Damn it all, Ben. Listen to you, a grown man, thinking about magic treehouses. You snap on the bedside lamp. Forget it. You're not getting any sleep, and according to the clock, you'd be up in an hour anyway. Get these thoughts out of your head, Ben.

You go to your dresser and grab some socks from the top drawer. A run will be good. It's not too dark, and the morning air that's still relatively cool will clear your head. That's what you need. A clear head. Rewire your brain—

Wire.

It's okay, Ben.

You grind your teeth. He said that through a mouth wired shut. Tried to anyway. Remember that? Remember how you bent over him, blubbing like you always did, and that creepy, metal moan came out of David's mouth as he tried to tell you what he'd always told you. It should've been your mouth wired. It should've been you making that creepy, metal moan. It should've been you who was punished. You helpless piece of shit. You tried to tell David that. All you said was sorry. You helpless piece of—

You hurl the ball cap into the corner. The plastic button rattles against the wall, and the brim smacks the carpet with a soft thump. You exhale because you're holding your breath again and because you should loosen your jaw since it's not your mouth that was wired, though it should have been.

You flop onto the bed because your limbs are still too heavy and yank the shoes on your feet. If you move fast, the memories will leave. The sooner you're outside, the sooner you'll wake up in a new world, the sooner you'll exhaust yourself, the sooner you'll forget.

You'll do what you always do: Get up before anyone else is awake, run before the world is awake, come home and clean up before anyone else is awake, fuel up on a hell a lot of coffee, and get to work hard enough so that you'll crash hard enough when evening rolls around. You didn't work today so that's why you won't sleep. Tomorrow's Saturday though. Or today, rather. Oh well. You'll find something to do. There's bound to be a leaky sink or a clogged drain or something. You'll take Jack to the beach and run the entire length of the shoreline if you have to. There's a variety of physical sleeping pills you can swallow throughout the day to sap the energy from you. Ultimately, there'll be something to knock you out.

So swallow the first sleeping pill: running around the block at 5:07 in the morning.

You pick up that ball cap in the corner before you go.

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