Shooter Part Two

**ISABELLE**

BRI:

OMG NOT A DRILL!

Overheard Wilson and cops.

There’s like five of them now and more coming.

They said there’s a SHOOTER in the building!!! A SHOOTER!!  
He shot out the atrium display cases.

OMG IZZY NOT A DRILL!

IZZY:

SHOT?! Like with a GUN?!

BRI:

I’ll txt if I hear anything else  
OMG I can’t stop shaking.

What if he comes in the office?

What if he finds me?

IZZY:

Stay hidden. Stay quiet.

No one knows you’re there.

Just stay where you are.

00:51:57

**ALICE**

I read about stuff like this in the news—shootings, guns, real lockdowns.

But it doesn’t happen here at St. Francis Xavier. Right? This can’t be really happening.

The text has to be part of the prank. Yes. That’s probably it. That has to be it.

Isabelle returns to sit in the corner opposite Xander. Apparently, whatever threat he poses is less than the unknown danger outside that blue door. Her thumbs dart in a blur over her iPhone screen as she texts.

"Don’t worry,” the Hulk says. "It’s just another Friday prank. Another stupid joke.” But even he isn’t sounding too convinced.

True, there have been many of those ridiculous pranks this past semester. Up until Mr. Wilson called the assembly about it, they seemed to be happening almost every other Friday. The X-Guvs, or whoever they are, would pull the fire alarm sending the whole school out to the back field. Then, while the building was empty they’d stay back and set up their latest stunt. No one knew who they were, but we all knew their pranks: false alarms, stink bombs, exploding garbage cans. But the worst, by far, was when they destroyed the grad mural. Splattered the whole thing with red and yellow paint in their signature big X.

“It’s not a joke. It’s vandalism,” I say, remembering how crushed I was when I saw the mural. It took the committee (me and Lucy Lowry) weeks to design our Tree of Knowledge, and weeks more to hand-letter every grad’s name on a leaf. "That was supposed to be our grad legacy.”

The Hulk shrugs. “Guess some people wanna be remembered in a different way.”

“By pranks? Nice legacy,” I mumble. When Grampa died this winter, he left behind Waters’ Farm, the kennels, the dogs he bred and trained over the years, the happy families that adopted them, the Pet Therapy Program he started at the Children’s Hospital—all the things Gran and I are trying to carry on. Now that is a legacy—something worth leaving behind.

Isabelle looks up from her phone. “Well, there are tons of better ways to be known and remembered than pranks or a mural.” She flicks her gaze towards me. “No offense.”

“What—like pep rallies?” the Hulk scoffs. “Sony, but I’d rather be known for something other than wearing stupid Spirit Day crap.”

“You are,” she snaps, and folds her arms.

She seems insulted, but he’s right. I mean, who wants to walk around school all day in a precariously pinned bedsheet? I’m sure a bunch of those togas were still warm off the mattress that morning. That’s not fun. It’s unsanitary.

“I guess some kids wanna leave St. F-it with a bang,” the Hulk continues. “You know, make their mark in their own way.”

We all look at him. Even Xander.

Isabelle eyes him skeptically. “You don’t know amthing about this...prank, do you, Hogan?”

For a moment, he seems almost hurt by her accusation. But the scowl quickly returns, drops over the hurt like a mask. Like the Hulk is unable to control a bit of Bruce Banner from breaking out now and then.

“What?” she says defensively. “You do have a record. I’m just saying.”

“For stealing. One stupid Supercycle from Canadian Tire.” He sneers in disgust. “It’s bad enough it cost me my placement there, my co-op credit, a month’s grounding, AND a criminal record. I needed that co-op credit to graduate.”

“Technically, you did break the law,” Xander adds, for no good reason whatsoever.

“I needed a bike,” the Hulk says, like that justifies everything. “So what? Now I’m guilty of being a psycho? Nice. Thanks, Izzv. Thanks a lot.”

"That’s not what I meant and you know it.” She defends herself so hotly, I wonder if she really does feel bad for bringing it up. "I was just...just pointing out the facts.”

“Can’t argue with fact,” Xander adds, unhelpfully.

“Well, how about I point out a few facts about you?” The Hulk spits the words. “Little Miss Perfect driving Mommy’s BMW to soccer practice. And horseback riding. And dance competitions. And drama-geekfests. I wanna horse. I wanna cruise. I wanna iPhone.”

A flush spreads up her neck and cheeks and she quietly slips her phone into her back pocket.

“Little Miss Perfect who gets any toy, any trip...and any guy she wants,” he continues. “John, Trev, Darren. Sounds like you’ve got a record of your own.”

“What?” She frowns as she searches for the words. “I’m not...I don’t...”

“So do you just order boyfriends— like some kinda drive-thru? ‘Gimme a tall blond.’ ‘I’ll try a grande bold, black.’ Or do you just go for the special of the month, like your fancy tai chi?”

Chai tea, I correct, pleased that I manage to keep that one inside my head.

He has a point. She does do all of those things, right down to the Starbucks. But that is just Isabelle. Isabelle Parks—the chosen one. School President. Yearbook Editor. MVP. Isabelle Parks not only knows all about the school, she runs it. In her mind, she is St. F.X. High School. She often comes late to class because she stops at the drive-thru on her spare. Had I the car or money to buy a coffee every day, or the nerve to always come late to class, I would at least bring one in for Ms. Carter. But it never seems to occur to Isabelle that she is interrupting us each time she arrives late. I guess, in her egocentric universe, nothing starts until she arrives. No lesson. No meeting. No practice. No performance. If she thinks of us at all, which she obviously doesn’t, she must assume that we just sit around in nothingness waiting for her appearance. Like she is the Big Bang.

But I never take it personally. Everything in Isabelle’s life is about Isabelle. She is the center of her universe and that of her parents, her friends, and every guy who has ever been infatuated with her. Their worlds revolve around her.

So she has both parents. So what? So they are rich lawyers. So she has the time and talent to excel at whatever she tries. Sure we envy her for it. Wonder what it would be like to be that dark-haired girl standing on stage bathed in a spotlight and drowned in applause. Who wouldn’t? But I’ve never seen anyone react like the Hulk. Like he sees her successes as inversely proportional to his own. Like she does it to spite him.

“Shut up, Hogan,” she finally says, eyes brimming. “You don’t know amthing about me. So just shut it.”

*Click.*

Xander’s shutter stops her short. She glares at where he sits, face hidden behind the lens.

"Did you...?” She wipes her eyes. “Ohmigod, did you seriously just take a picture of me right now?!”

*Click.*

Xander takes another, catching the exact moment her pain flares into anger.

"What the hell?!” She stands and looks at her face in the cracked mirror as she runs her finger under her eyes to wipe the mascara smudge. “I told you before. Wilson told you. You can’t just go around taking random pictures like that!”

An overreaction. Even for Isabelle.

"Why not?” I ask, curious now. As Yearbook Editor she rarely went anywhere without her camera. "You take pictures all the time.” Not that I am ever in any of them. Still, I don’t know why she is reacting so strongly. “I assumed you liked having your picture taken...given all your selfies on Instagram and Facebook.”

"Oh, so now you’re creeping me?” She raises her eyebrows and put her hands on her hips, challenging me.

“Um, no,” I say, unsure if it is creeping, exactly. I am sorry I spoke. Why did I speak? Nothing good ever comes of it. "It’s just...we are friends.”

"Friends?” She looks at me like I just articulated the ridiculous.

"On Facebook, I mean.”

"Oh. That. So, not like real-real friends.”

Real-real friends?

“Well,” I say, “it’s not like you’re my imaginary friend. Although I did have one of those when I was younger—”

“Whatever.” Thankfully, she cuts me off. “I have, like, 1,523 Facebook friends and almost 1,800 followers on Instagram.” She turns back to the mirror and fixes her perfect hair. “I can’t be expected to know them all.”

“But you know' me, right?” I blurt. I mean, she does. She has to. “We went to elementary school together since kindergarten? Remember? I invited you to my last birthday party7 back in grade 4?”

Everything comes out like a question. But I know' the answer. My face burns.

“C’mon, Izzv,” the Hulk jeers, enjoying my awkw7ard moment. He gestures at me with his furry arm. “What’s her name?” Like he knows. I doubt he does. I hope he doesn’t.

She looks at me then, as if willing herself to remember. But the truth is, she can’t. “I knowof you,” she brags, like that is something. “You’re...that guy’s sister. Allie, right?”

“It’s Alice, actually,” I mumble, recalling that she did not come to that birthday party because, as she told me then, "Your brother is too weird.”

But even my words get lost as she turns to the Hulk. “See?” She smiles triumphantly. “I do know who she is.”

**XANDER**

*Writer's Craft Journal*

*Xander Watt*

*February 4,2016*

PROMPT: If you could only save one thing in a fire, what would that be?

Facts: July 25, 2011—Mom’s Matinée cigarette fell onto the living room carpet and started to smolder. The fire alarm woke me at 1:25 a.m., and when I saw the smoke and flames, I called 9-1-1. The operator told me to get everyone out. In the 13 minutes it took the fire truck to get to our house, I not only helped Mom onto a lawn chair out front, as well as Sheldon, my turtle, I also rescued the three crates of Dad’s comics collection I carried up from the basement, my box of 151 original Pokémon guys, my Lego Death Star that Dad and I were working on, and even a box of Ritz crackers in case Mom and I got hungry. The firemen arrived at 1:38 while I was standing on the porch in my Darth Vader PJs. Back to the flames, camera in hand, I looked through the lens at all I had saved that night.

Mom, slumped in her Blue Jays lawn chair, surrounded by all our most important things. I’d put hers in her lap: her big, red purse, her near-empty bottle of Jackson-Triggs wine, her pack of Matinée cigarettes.

*Click.*

The lighting was perfect. Excellent composition. It still is one of my most favorite pictures. Mom thanked the firemen for saving our house that night. I thought she would have been happy with all I did, but when she saw that photo, she only cried.

I was twelve, just a kid, really, but I realized four things on July 25:

1. Anyone can save more than one thing in a typical house fire.
2. Though she’s always looking for them, apparently, Mom’s purse, Matinée cigarettes, and Jackson-Triggs wine are NOT her favorite things.
3. Had I not called 9-1-1 (like I was supposed to) and not evacuated (like I was supposed to), I probably could have peed on the carpet (like I’m not supposed to) and put the fire out.
4. Dad really wasn’t coming back home. Not for his comics. Not for his camera. And not for me.

So to answer your illogical question, if I had to pick just one thing, I’d pick my camera. It’s a Canon T90, a manual focus 35 mm SLR. Nicknamed “the Tank” by Japanese photojournalists because of its ruggedness. Like me, it can endure a lot of things. Plus the T90 is voted by experts as the best Canon design ever—even if newer models are preferred by other photographers.

And my dad.

00:50:05

**HOGAN**

The awkward silence after the name-that-girl gongshow doesn't last long.

Unfortunately.

I’m not one for talk and these girls never shut up. Xander’s weird and all. And kinda obsessed with that picture thing. But at least he’s quiet. Minds his own business.

"They’re not answering.” Izzv’s thumbs tick-tick-tick across the phone. "Why won’t they answer?”

"Oh, so everyone has to jump when you call?” I say.

"Who?” Alice asks.

"Darren or Bri,” Izzy says. “She’s hiding in the main office. But I haven’t heard from Darren since before the lockdown.”

“Well,” Alice goes, “it’s against the rules to text in a lockdown.”

I’m not a rule follower, but still, this isn’t some drill. Or some prank. Something’s not right. I feel it in my gut. “What’s the point of hiding from a psycho shooter if their phones keep buzzing with your stupid texts?”

“Psycho shooter?” She looks at me, horrified, then back at the phone.

Alice nods. “Well, clearly, anyone who brings a gun to a school is unstable.” She starts mumbling about stats in the news.

I’m not sure why I keep giving Izzy such a hard time. All that crap about being a princess. About the guys she’s dated. I’m jealous of Darren. I admit it. But why the digs about remembering Alice’s name, and, now, freaking her out about her texts? Hurting Izzy? That’s the last thing I want to do. But things get all jumbled in my head and come out the wrong way, and they usually end up sounding like the exact opposite of what I mean. Honestly, I was trying to reassure her. No. That’s not it, exactly. What I really want is for her to stop texting and pay attention to me. But it seems the only attention I know how to get is for being an ass.

And I am a master at that. Just to prove it (and in part to stop Alice from freaking everyone out with her gunmen trivia) I kick Xander’s foot. “So, loser. Tell us what you did that’s got Izzy so freaked out? Did you take her picture or something?”

He stops messing with his camera and looks at me in surprise. Like he’s just realized I’m in the room. Or where he is. Total spacer.

“Hogan!” Izzy snaps. “Why don’t you just mind your own busin—”

“Was she naked? She totally was!” That must be it. I mean, why else would she be so riled up about it? “Were you stalking her through the bedroom window?”

I see it all play out in my imagination. It’s pretty sweet.

“No,” Xander mumbles. “The door was open and I saw7 her—”

“Shut! Up!” Izzy cuts him off.

“Dude,” I go, “you could make some serious coin with those.” I know I’d pay to see them. What guy wouldn’t?

Alice is completely bug-eyed. “That’s child pornography! You know that, right? A criminal offense. Even if you don’t pay for it, even if it’s e-mailed and you just forward it, you could be implicated. Don’t you remember what Officer Scott said? In that Social Media Safety presentation about—”

“I wasn’t naked!” Izzy yells.

I look at Xander and he shakes his head. Now I’m really curious. “So...what, then?”

He opens his mouth.

“I swear to God, Xander.” Izzy points at him. “If you say one word about it, you’re dead.”

His face goes pale, like she’s waving a machete and not a manicured finger. His mouth snaps shut.

So much for that.

"But you guys know that, right?” Alice continues with her public service announcement. Totally killing my buzz. "About naked pictures? Because a teenager is legally a minor. So, even if I forwarded a photo like that in a text, I’d be liable. And-”

“Yeah, we get it!” Izzv interrupts. ‘I don’t think you have anything to worry about. People sending you naked photos, Alice? Is that, like, a real-life true- drama problem for you?” Izzv looks at her with that face. The one I thought she saved for me. The one that says: God, you’re an idiot. “Do you, like, even have a phone?”

“Um, no. Well, not exactly,” Alice says. “My Gran has a flip phone—”

“A flip phone?” Izzv laughs. Alice might as well have said she uses a banana phone. I mean, I don’t have a phone either. But only because I lost it. Three times. At least when I have one it’s the latest model.

“Yeah.” Alice laughs, but her face doesn’t.

“How do you text? Or check e-mail? Or take pictures? It’s like you’re living in the 1980s.”

Alice shrugs like it’s no big deal. “I never really...I dunno. I guess, I just don’t need a phone.”

“Oh, right. I get it.” Izzy nods condescendingly. “I mean, no offense, but who are you gonna call?”

“GHOST...BUSTERS!” Xander explodes. We all stop and stare at him. A look of panic crosses his face. “You know?” And then, he starts to sing, like that’ll help. “Some-thin’ strange...” He’s nodding and waving his hand for us to join in. “In your neigh-bor-hood...Who you gonna call?”

Silence.

Xander’s lips part like he’s showing his teeth to the dentist. I think he’s trying to smile. Or something. It’s just weird.

“Something strange is right,” I say.

His mouth closes and he looks back at his camera. “Ray Parker, Jr.,” he mutters. "From the soundtrack. I have the 45.”

“SUCH a loser,” Izzy says, cutting him off.

“It’s a movie,” Alice explains. “About a trio of spirit exterminators. I think it’s from the 80s.”

“Well, you would know.” Izzy sighs dramatically as she returns to her phone. “Could this day get any worse?”

I wish she hadn’t asked that. Because it always can.

At least, for me, it always does.

**ISABELLE**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| BRI: | Sorry, couldn’t reply. Trying to hear what Wilson and the cops are saying in his office.  There’s like five of them here now and more on the way. |
| IZZY: | Do they know who it is? |
| BRI: | Don’t think so. |
| IZZY: | Are you ok to txt? I don’t wanna get you in trouble.  Or draw attention with the buzzing. |
| BRI: | On mute.;) |

Txting is my lifeline. Seriously.

This whole thing is INSANE.

I can’t stop shaking.

You doing ok?

IZZY: Ya if you think being stuck in a washroom with Hogan and Xander Watt is ok.

BRI:?? Xander is there too?

IZZY: Yep. Shoot me now.

Sorry. :/

...you know what I mean.

BRI: It’s like your worst nightmare.

IZZY: No kidding.

Get this. He’s already taken two pics of me!!!

BRI: Seriously?? WTF?

What about Wilson’s “behavior contract”?

Isn’t it supposed to be like some restraining order—no more pics of you?

IZZY: Kind of. Wilson made him destroy mine.

BRI: I never did see them. How bad could they be?

You look amazing all the time.

IZZY: Bad. Believe me.

BRI: They should’ve done more than just kick him out of Yearbook class.

IZZY: He never should have been in it in the first place.

He never edited the grad write-ups.

And his pics were just...weird.

People pay $60 for a yearbook, they want pics of GOOD memories.

BRI: Like hot football players.

IZZY: EXACTLY! Teams winning. High-fives. Spirit Week.

BRI: Friends hanging out and having fun.

IZZY: Not creeper shots of breakups, loners eating lunch, or druggies lighting up.

BRI: Seriously. Who wants to see that?

IZZY: I had to do all my work AND his to meet the deadline.

BRI: What’s he doing now?

IZZY: Just sitting there. Zooming in and out on the floor. OBSESS much??

BRI: Effed up. Loser.

**XANDER**

*Writer’s Craft Journal*

*Xander Watt*

*February 18, 1O16*

ASSIGNMENT: read the poem “Ellie: An Inventory of Being” and write one in a similar form about yourself. Explore and express those inner conflicts as concisely as you can.

I am Xander.

I am seventeen years old.

Mom calls me Alexander.

Grandpa can’t remember what to call me.

Dad just never calls.

I am sometimes ignored,

often forgotten,

mostly invisible—

but it’s no superpower.

I don’t know how to talk to girls.

I don’t get them

so I don’t get them.

But that’s okay because, like all strange and unusual creatures,

they both intrigue and terrify me.

I think too much sometimes,

blurt the wrong thing often,

and feel confused, always.

I do Social Autopsies,

dissecting my awkward conversations

to determine the exact

cause of death.

I want to finish the Lego Death Star I started when I was nine.

But I’m still missing a key piece—

my dad.

I am anti-Superman

and pro-Marvel.

I like a hero with a troubled past.

I guess, it gives me hope.

I wish life unfolded in graphic panels,

logical boxes of daily drama

narrated by Stan Lee or George Lucas.

A world where thoughts were clear and bold

in big bubbles overhead.

Then I’d get it.

I’d get you.

Because we are all just comic characters, really.

All of us villainous heroes or heroic villains

depending on the day.

I wonder what my life’s mission will be?

Where will I boldly go?

But first, I need to fix some broken things.

Like my cracked camera lens.

My Lego Death Star.

And my family.

My name is Xander and this is me in 2016.

00:48:56

**ALICE**

I feel bad for Xander. He really has no clue. Conversations are like skipping double-dutch—completely confusing, next to impossible to enter, and mastered only by the cool girls, like Isabelle. She was the double-dutch queen back at St. Daniel’s. Double-dutch, like a conversation, can look really confusing at first with so much going on in two directions, but if you watch closely, find the rhythm, and pace yourself, you just might be able to jump in.

Theoretically.

Timing is everything. So is how you enter. And leading with something like a terrible rendition of obscure lines from an ’80s song is a sure way to kill a conversation. Jump in with that and just watch lines of communication drop dead around you.

Believe me, I know. Too bad Xander doesn’t.

I never was able to get the hang of double-dutch even though I spent most grade 4 and 5 recesses as an ever-ender. Watching. Waiting. Wishing.

Well, at least until they replaced me with the flagpole.

Thankfully, no one is talking now. It’s a lockdown, for heaven’s sake! We’re not supposed to make any noise at all. Bad enough that we aren’t in our classes. Or that we didn’t even have the door locked at first! Need I remind them, this isn’t just a drill? (Maybe I do. They obviously forgot all about the Social Media Safety presentation.)

Rules exist for a reason. I know all about living with rules and, especially, the chaos that happens when they are ignored.

"There’s, like, five cops downstairs and more coming,” Izzy says. Thankfully, she’s keeping her voice down. "What are they waiting for? Why aren’t they just going after him?”

The Hulk leans his head back against the wall and closes his eyes. "After who, exactly?”

"Dull! The shooter,” she says. "What are they waiting for?”

"Well,” he adds, not opening his eyes, "if an armed posse is sweeping the halls, it’s probably smart to first get some idea of who they’re looking for. There’s fifteen hundred people in this building. He could be anyone. How are they gonna know which one to arrest?”

She frowns for a second. "Well, he’s the one with the gun, obviously!”

"Oh, right. He’s just sitting there waiting for them to come and find him.” He smirks. "It’s not some hide-and-seek game, Iz. The guy probably has some kind of plan.”

I don’t like the sound of that.

"It’s common sense,” the Hulk continues. "They need to know as much as they can about the guy before they start shooting everything that moves.”

"Is that what they do?” I ask, aghast.

"All the kids and teachers are locked down,” Isabelle says. "Anyone out in the hall is clearly the perp.”

"Pfffft!" the Hulk chides. "The perp. Listen to you. You think binge-watching HBO cop shows makes you an authority on policing?”

"Oh, and petty theft does?”

"Guys, guys,” I remind them, "we really shouldn’t be talking.” I glance at the blue door. "I mean, he could be right outside.”

"We’re fine,” the Hulk says. "For all we know the guy took off after he trashed the atrium displays. It’s just anoth—”

*BANG!*

We jump at the explosive sound still ringing in the hall outside. Even the Hulk sits bolt upright and glances warily at the door.

"Is that a gunshot?” Isabelle whispers hysterically. "It’s him! It’s him! He’s right outside our door!”

*BANG-BANG-BANGBANG!*

Isabelle screams. Or maybe I do as I cower at the sound, hands over my ears. But nothing stops the thud-thud-thudding of my heart. Another shriek. This time I know it’s not me. Or Isabelle. The scream is coming from outside the washroom, fading with the footsteps as someone runs down the hall.

I go numb. It can’t be. It can’t.

But it is.

I’d know that wail anywhere. And though everything in my body says hide, I push my back into the wall, dig my feet into the floor, and drive my shaky legs to straighten and stand.

"Ohmigodohmigod, we’re gonna die!” Isabelle rocks slightly as the Hulk moves over and puts his arm around her.

"You’re okay. We’re safe in here and no one is getting in,” he whispers, as he rubs her back, trying to comfort her. I move towards the door. "That’s probably just the police,” he says. "If they’ve found him, it’s gonna be over soon.”

He’s probably right. And that is exactly why I have to go out.

**HOGAN**

Alice moves to the door. What the hell is she doing?

The panic on her face is clear as she looks at the bolt and back at me and Izzy. "I have to go out there.”

"What?” I jump up and join her. "Are you nuts?” I whisper. "Five minutes ago you’re obsessing like some crazy bylaw officer: lock the door, no talking, no texting. And now, you want to leave?”

She unlocks the deadbolt with a thunk.

I slap my hand on the door, holding it shut. "Listen. Maybe there is nothing to worry about. Like I said, it’s probably some lame prank. But use that nerd-brain of yours, Alice. The fact is some nutjob is out there with a gun. A GUN!”

She heaves on the handle, but it won’t budge. “Please!” She pulls with all her puny strength. “That is exactly why I have to go out there.”

“What about the rules?”

“It’s Noah.” She looks at me with desperate eyes. “That was him screaming. He’s out there somewhere. Don’t you get it? Noah needs me.” She tugs on the handle. “You have to let me go. Please! I have to help my brother.”

My hand falters at the word “brother,” and just like that—she yanks the door open just enough to squeeze through.

Crouched, she scurries down the side of the hallway, stopping to listen every *few* feet. For her prey. For her predator. Just like a small mouse.

“OhmiGOD! What are you doing?” Izzv whispers, pushing on the door as I watch Alice kneel by the corner at the far end of the hall. “Are you, like, insane?! Shut it! Shut it! Lock it! Lock it!”

Xander doesn’t move. “I wouldn’t go out there if I were you,” he says. Like he knows what I’m considering. Hell, I don’t even know.

No, wait, I do.

I’m thinking about Randy. About how helpless I felt watching the blood, so much blood, spill out of my brother’s head on the gray tiles.

*And it was all your fault.*

I’m thinking about how I would’ve given anything, done anything, to save him. I’m thinking Alice has a ton of nerve, that little Nerd Girl. And heart. And absolutely no common sense at all.

And without thinking any more, I fling open the door and run after her.

NOAH

**Lockdown Social Story**

When there is a LOCKDOWN the teacher will

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| LOCK |  |

the door.

turn OFF the lights,

and COVER the windows.

Students stay in the classroom.  
Everyone must be QUIET.

NO TALKING allowed in a lockdown.

Wait quietly until  
Principal Wilson or a police officer  
opens the door.

*Not the room.*

*Not the room.*

*Not the right room.*

*Ha-KU-na Ma-TA-ta!*

*Ha-KU-naMci-TA-ta!*

*Ha-KU-na Ma-TA-ta!*

**ISABELLE**

He left me? He left me! Ohmigod!

How could Hogan just leave me? Now? In here with him?

For a moment, I think about running after Hogan and Alice. I even crack open the door and check down the hall.

Empty.

Screw you, Hogan! How could you be so selfish? What about me?

Who knows where they are now, or the gunman, for that matter? I close the door and lock it. Xander is sitting in the corner *with* his damn camera.

Better the psycho I know than the one I don’t, I guess.

I hope.

"Don’t get any ideas,” I say, moving to the corner farthest from him.

He blinks. “I get ideas all the time. How do you stop yourself from—?”

“I mean stay over there. And no pictures.”

He nods.

I check my phone. Still no word from Darren. I send another text.

Why isn’t he answering?

Maybe his phone is dead. I don’t let myself think beyond that. I can’t or I’ll lose it completely.

This can’t be happening. It can’t.

And yet, it is.

“Could this day get any worse?” I mutter.

“Why do you always ask that?” Xander says. “It is an odd question. I mean, wouldn’t it make more sense to ask how it might get better?”

True. With an armed psycho on the loose, it definitely might get worse. Much worse. "Whatever.”

Nervously, I fiddle with my woven bracelet, spinning its knot around my wrist.

“Did you make that?” he asks.

“No,” I say, not really wanting to talk to him, of all people. But I need the distraction. “It was a gift. From my DR mom. She made it for me.”

“What’s a DR mom?”

“You know, the DREX team?”

He shakes his head. How has he not heard of DREX? We’ve been fundraising, like, all year. The cake auction. The dance. Hello? "Dominican Republic Experience team? A bunch of us went to the DR.”

“Like, at a resort?”

I snort. “No, this was nothing like a resort. We stayed with the locals and visited the sugarcane fields, the orphanage. Stuff like that. You know, see what their life is really like. Anyway, Teresa, the mother at the house that billeted me, she gave me this when I left.”

Teresa. I smile a bit, just thinking about her and her family. Even though I was only with her for ten days, honestly, it was the closest thing I ever felt to being truly mothered. We barely spoke each other’s language and yet, from the moment she welcomed me off the bus and into her home, I felt like she knew me. Really knew me. Really cared, anyway.

“Oh, so you were helping the poor,” he says.

“Sort of...well, we gave them school supplies and stuff. But I feel like I learned so much from them.”

I’ve been home two weeks, and I still can’t even put that trip into words. Miss Sweeney, one of the teacher supervisors, suggested we journal. But all the things I saw, the injustice, the poverty, men laboring in the sugarcane fields, women working in the sweatshops, orphans—God, the orphans— there are no words. Not really.

I shrug and spin the bracelet round and round and round. “I dunno. But I’ve felt...different since I came back.”

“Are you sick?” Xander asks. “You don’t look sick.”

“No. But my real mother thinks I caught a bug of some kind.”

She’s been on my case ever since I got home a few weeks back. She keeps telling me, “You’re not acting like yourself.” Shopping. Pedicures. Partying— it just doesn’t interest me any more. All that stuff that mattered so much before I left—having more, being more, just to impress more—it just seemed so trivial, so ridiculous when I got home. My mother asked if I’d taken all of my malaria pills. Did I drink their water? “This is your final year, Isabelle!” she ranted. “I should never have let you go on that trip. You can’t afford to be sick, not now, not when it’s all about the grades.”

For my mother, it is always about marks. My whole purpose in life is making the grade. And hers, apparently, is about making me make it.

“I’m just sick of my mother always being on my case,” I blurt. “Now it’s about acceptance letters. It’s my life! Why can’t I just do what I want to do?”

The outburst catches me by surprise. Why am I telling this to Xander Watt, of all people? But in some ways, it’s so easy. He has no expression. No

judgment. And I really don’t care what he thinks anyway. Kinda like telling it to a robot.

He blinks. “What do you want to do?”

His question catches me off guard.

“I just...I just want to...” I heave a sigh. “I dunno. No one’s ever asked me before. All I know is this trip changed everything. All the things I used to think were so important—aren’t. Not anymore.” I shrug and look down at my bracelet, admit what I’ve been wondering these past few weeks. “Maybe I’m depressed.”

But he doesn’t look at me all judgey. “What does your mom think?”

I laugh, but it’s not funny. “Yeah, I can only imagine the total freakshow if I ever told her I felt depressed. In my house, we don’t heal scars, we hide them. Because if her kid is messed up, that means she messed up. And my mother never makes mistakes, never loses a case, never fails at anything. Ever.”

We sit in silence.

“You’re like my blue Hanes,” he says.

“Your what?”

“Hanes. My underwear,” he says, all matter-of-fact. “They were my favorite pair.”

And suddenly I’m sorry I ever spoke. Xander Watt? Pfft! What was I thinking? Of course he’s gonna get all inappropriate and stupid. It’s what he does.

“I wore them all the time,” he goes. “Mom even washed them out each night so I could wear them again the next day.”

I don’t want to know. I really don’t. But I can’t help myself. “What—like, you only owned one pair of underwear?”

“Oh, no. I have lots. But I don’t like tags. And the waistband should have a certain elasticity. And sometimes the seams on the other pairs make my testicles—”

“Okay, okay.” I throw my hands up. “I get it. These are your favorite pair. So what?”

“Well, I guess they got caught in the spinner or something and got totally stretched out. Just like you.”

I raise my eyebrow at him. “Hello? Did you just compare my life to your nasty-ass underpants?”

“Yes.” He nods, like it makes total sense. “It’s a metaphor. A metaphor is when you—”

“I know what a metaphor is!” God! I’m so irritated to be caught up in his nonsense. “I just don’t know why I bothered to listen to yours.”

He shrugs and looks down at his camera strap. “Well, it makes sense to me. The DREX stretched you out. You can’t go back to the way things were. No matter how much you want to.” He nods, sure of it. “You’re just like my blue Hanes.”

I want to make some sharp comeback. To laugh him off. But as I watch him fiddling with his camera strap, not looking at me at all, I actually start to see some sense in his words. Life is about stretching yourself, I guess. And once your heart has been expanded there’s no going back.

My parents, Bri, Darren—none of them get what I’ve been trying to say. I don’t even get it myself. But Xander Watt does. Go figure.

“You know, Xander, in some weird way, that’s, like, the wisest thing anyone’s said to me these past *two* weeks.”

“Sometimes, you just know when it’s time to let things go and move on, right?”

I smile a bit, suprised by this weird connection. Who knows? Maybe I’ve been misjudging this guy all along. “It’s like, you gotta be open to change when you see the signs.”

He nods again, completely serious. “Like skidmarks. Now there’s a sure sign it’s time to change.”

**ALICE**

I peek around the corner down the locker-lined hallway. Empty. No Noah. And no shooter either, thank God. I sprint, ducking into the first doorway to catch my breath. I stop and listen. Nothing.

Moving doorway to doorway, I skirt up the hallway, sure I’ll be caught any second. But none of that matters, Noah is out here, somewhere. I just know it.

He should be with Kim, the educational assistant who works most closely with him. Period 4—that’s reading time in the High Needs room or the library. But in all the drama, I forgot that Kim is off sick today. And though Julie, her supply, is a nice enough lady who knows all about autism, she knows nothing about Noah. Because only someone who really knows my brother would know that he bolts.

I swallow and listen for his familiar noises, hearing nothing but my heart drumming in my ears.

Come on. Where are you, Noah?

There’s no point in calling his name. It would draw the police—who would most certainly lock me down. Or the shooter—who would most probably shoot me down. My stomach twists. No, calling won’t help. Besides, even if he hears me, Noah won’t answer.

At the last doorway before the hall splits, I stop and strain to hear that familiar tune: “Hakuna Matata.” Noah hums it over and over when he’s in distress. Most people wouldn’t recognize the song, or even recognize it as a song, but it’s as clear to me as if he’s calling my name. Whenever he has nightmares, feels anxious, or is simply getting overwhelmed by the crowds or sounds, he starts humming, moaning, and flapping his hands. Rocking. Head slapping. And, if he gets there, a full-on meltdown.

Thankfully, he hasn’t had one of those in a while. A couple of months at least. The last time, Kim was away for the day and the supply EA that day wasn’t picking up on his triggers. He had a meltdown so bad that afternoon that they called a Secure School. Kept the classroom doors locked while the whole High Needs team tried to rein him in and calm him down. The last thing he’d need at that point was hundreds of kids pushing by in the hallway after the bell rang.

I should have been there. I should have known. I could tell things weren’t great that day when I stopped by the High Needs room on the main floor. I usually eat lunch there with him, but that day, I just dropped off his

sandwich and juice. I had to meet Ms. Carter to go over my writing portfolio for that pointless application. He seemed agitated, unsettled as he paced the room, uninterested in the match-the-card game the supply EA had spread out on the table. He’ll be okay, I told myself. Apparently, he wasn’t.

That meltdown never would have happened if I’d been there. I knew it. Gran knew it, too. Even if she never voiced it. I could tell by the way she looked at me.

“You’re not his guardian angel,” Mrs. Goodwin said later when I sat in the guidance office in tears. “You can’t be everywhere. You can’t watch over him all the time.”

Mrs. Goodwin was probably right. But so was Gran.

“You and I are all he has,” she told me years ago, when he’d had a major meltdown in the elementary playground. When I learned I couldn’t just watch or run away even when others did. When I realized that Noah isn’t like the other kids and, because of that, neither am I. “If we don’t watch out for poor Noah,” Gran explained, “who will?”

Both are true. I have to watch over Noah even though I will often fail. But what kind of sister would I be if I didn’t even try?

I bolt across the hallway and lean flat against the lockers at the intersection where the halls form a T. Straight ahead, on the right, the stairwell doors lead down to the atrium. On the left are the windows overlooking it. It’s a great vantage point to see down three hallways at once—and also, I realize, completely exposed.

Then I hear it: HaKUna MaTAta. HaKUna MaTAta. HaKUna MaTAta.

It’s so faint I think I might have imagined it. I want to hear it so badly I wonder if I have. But no, the song grows louder as I travel the empty hall. And I know where he is.

Of course! The janitor’s closet!

Noah always helps the custodian after lunch. His job is to sweep the floor, and Noah takes it pretty seriously. Mr. Dean even gave Noah his own broom —a four-foot-wide, swivel-head thing that can clear three tiles wide in one shove. Whether it’s the sensation of it against the tile, the repetitious motion, or the quiet time of them both pushing in tandem, Noah loves sweeping. It comforts him.

I grasp the door handle. Please be unlocked. The knob turns and I open the closet to find Noah moaning and rocking among the brooms and buckets. He’s gripping his broom’s handle—compulsively flicking the masking-tape tag marked “NOAH.” His orange Lion King hat is rolled down over his eyes and ears—a sure sign the world is just too overwhelming. He wears it that way a lot. Some days, I wish I had a hat of my own. A quick escape until the spotlight goes away and the crowd moves on. Until the teacher calls on someone else. Or the girls stop laughing. Until I am invisible again.

Noah’s song continues, and though there’s barely enough room for him to stand, he seems content. He’s always liked a tight squeeze when things feel chaotic. If he’s having a really bad day at home, I usually pile all the couch cushions on him and sit on top. “That’s not normal,” a friend said once when she came over. I didn’t know what she meant. It was our normal. We did it

all the time. I stopped inviting friends over after that—or maybe I had no friends to invite. But it doesn’t matter, really. Like Gran says, so long as Noah has a good day, we all do. Actually, I don’t know if that’s true, exactly. But I do know that if Noah has a bad day, we all do.

I glance down the hallway on both sides, unsure of what to do next. There’s still no sign of anyone else. But for how long? I try to squeeze in with him but there isn’t room for both of us. The door won’t shut, and the jostling pitches his moan up a notch.

Once again, I have written myself into a dead end. I always get these great ideas and excitedly plot from one point to the next.

Get out of the room. Find Noah. And...

And what?

As usual, I have no idea how to resolve it. Only this is the worst time for a creative block. Because I’m not abandoning some fictional character to his unfinished fate. This time, it’s real. This time, it’s Noah.

And I’m all he’s got.

**ISABELLE**

BRI: How you holding up?

IZZY: Ok, I guess. You?

BRI: I can’t believe this is real. Darren said it’s like an episode of  
Cops.

They’re searching the building now.

IZZY: Darren? He txted you?

BRI: Ya. Why?

IZZY: I’ve txted him this whole time—he hasn’t answered!

I thought his phone was off or in his locker.

What did he say? Is he mad at me or something?

BRI: Actually, we didn’t talk about you at ail.

IZZY: Oh.

Well what did he say?

BRI: Just stuff about Kate’s party. OMG it was crazy!

IZZY: You were there? I thought you weren’t going?

BRI: No...you said you weren’t going.

IZZY: You went without me? First Darren and now you?

WTF?!

BRI: Iz, you can’t get mad at us for wanting to have fun.

IZZY: Whatever. Like getting falling down drunk is fun.

I’m not into that. Not any more.

So, what lucky bachelor did you end up with this time?

Please tell me you didn’t get back with Todd.

BRI: No, I didn’t.

What’s up with you, anyway?

Even Darren says you haven’t been the same since your trip.

IZZY: I’m not. I’m all blue-Hanes-ed.

BRI: I don’t get it.

IZZY: I know.

**ALICE**

“Noah?” I take his hand firmly but gently. It flutters in my grasp like a trapped bird but I don’t let it go. I have to get him back to the washroom. It’s the only option. Not ideal, but safer. At least we’ll be together.

I pull the bottom of the broom handle slightly, sliding the rectangular head into the hall as I coax him out. “Noah. Come with me. It’s time to sweep.”

Noah doesn’t speak, but he has lots to say to the few people who know7 how to listen. No, his body says. He pulls away. Rocking side to side. Tapping his head. Noah knows his schedule, the photos Kim uses to cue him for his next activity. Lunch is over. Caf duty is done. It’s library time with Kim now. This isn’t right and he knows it.

“Come on, Noah,” I urge, slowly turning up his hat so he can see. He tilts his head, watches me in his peripheral vision, as usual. As much as I want him to, he never looks at me directly, but I know he is listening.

I push the broom head with my foot and he follows its handle out of the closet. His free fingers twiddle his hair, worrying the strands left around the bald spot behind his ear.

*BANG!*

Instinctively, I duck down, dragging Noah by the arm. The explosion came from the main stairwell. Close. Too close.

"MUTANTS RULE!” a guy’s voice shouts before getting drowned out by a series of blasts.

*BANG-BANG! BANG!*

Noah shrieks and raises his arm, breaking free to cover his ears.

*BANG-BANG!*

The stairwell window explodes, raining shards of glass down the hall.

“NO!” I reach, grasping at Noah’s track pants as he tries to bolt. “Stay with me! NOAH! Stay here!”

But it’s all too much for him. And he runs, broom in hand, back the way I came, disappearing around the corner.

I take off after him, terrified his long stride has already taken him out of my reach. But as I turn right, I run headlong into something huge. Someone

huge. And ricocheting off the barrel chest, I fall back to the ground among the broken glass.

I look up to see the Hulk towering over me. He’s got my brother by the scruff of the neck. And no matter how Noah shrieks and flails, the Hulk holds fast.

I don’t know whether to be terrified or thankful.

Then, with his free hand, the Hulk reaches down for me. “C’mon! Move!”

The three of us run back down the hall, circling wide by the west stairwell doors. We sprint for the men’s room, slamming into one another as we hit the locked door.

“Open up!” the Hulk pounds on it with his huge fist.

“She can’t open it,” I say, breathless. “It’s against the rules.”

“C’mon, Izzv!” He pounds harder. “It’s us. Open the damn door!”

A few pops echo in the empty hall. Not nearly as close as the last ones, but just as unnerving. Especially when we hear, “This is the police! Put down your weapon!”

The blasts continue and seem to be growing louder. Closer. Any second I expect to see gunmen come running around the far corner.

The Hulk looks at me and we both know, there’s no way she’s opening it now.

“Screw this!” he yells and lifts his huge furry foot. He kicks the door hard. Once. Twice. On the third, the wood splinters around the lock, and the door flies open to reveal Isabelle cowering and freaking in one corner. While in the other, Xander watches us all through the lens of his camera.

*Click.*

**ISABELLE**

“Ohmigod!” I scream as they literally come barging in. I rush past them and try to close the door but the bolt is ripped free. Which means the door won’t stay shut. Which means we’re gonna die!

Great. Just freaking great! Could this day get any worse?!

I walk over and shove him in his stupid furry chest. “You broke the damn door!”

“Well, YOU wouldn’t open it.” He pushes me aside and heads to a stall.

“We are in a freaking lockdown! Tell him, Alice!” I look at her for her rule-following support but she’s too busy trying to calm down her weirdo brother.

“Where the hell did he come from?” I ask, but no one answers. For all I know, he could be the one the cops are after.

I look back at Hogan, who has not gone into the stall but instead has grabbed the door by the top and side and is literally trying to rip it off.

“So you just go around breaking doors for fun now?” I say. “Is that it?”

The metal groans and shrieks as he twists and pulls. Is he serious right now? I glance back through the open doorway down the hall. He’s gonna get us killed.

I shout over the noise, “Why don’t you just put up a sign that says, HEY, PSYCHO, WE’RE IN HERE!?”

“Who needs a sign,” he snaps, “when we’ve got you screaming it at the top of your lungs?”

I cover my mouth.

With a metallic shriek the door rips free. I didn't think he could do it. But now that he has, I have no idea why. Hogan carries it to the entrance.

“That metal door is too small to fit there,” I say. But that isn’t his plan. Instead, he shuts the wooden door and, holding the metal one parallel to the floor, rams it against the wood, wedging it in between the door and the edge of the sink. Smart. Well, at least until he starts pounding on it with his thick fists.

BAM! BAM! BAM!

I roll my eyes. “Why don’t you make, like, more noise?”

Alice cuts in, “How about we all make less?” She looks a bit frazzled. With a brother like that, who wouldn’t? He’s dribbling and moaning like he’s in pain, rocking and bobbing in the corner like a one-man boxing match. A head taller than Alice, but just as skinny. Same blond hair under his goofy orange hat, same blue eyes. Only his are totally spaced out.

Hogan stops and looks at me. “No one gets in,” he turns to Alice, “or out.”

“Fine,” I say. “But how the hell are the police supposed to get in? Ever think of that?”

“Our plan right now,” he says, “is to keep quiet. As long as that crazy guy out there doesn’t know we’re here, we’re good.”

Then the spazzv brother turns and, I kid you not, strips. He, like, totally pulls down his track pants and underwear—all the way to his ankles—and starts peeing in a urinal. Right in front of me.

“Ew.” I turn away and cover my eyes. “Seriously?! Does he have to do that here?”

“It’s a men’s washroom, Izzy,” Hogan says, like I don’t already know. “Where else is he gonna go?”

The sound stops. But when I look back all I see is his hairy butt as he bends over to pull up his pants. “Ugh! Totally gross.”

*Click.*

"Oh, come on, Xander!” I turn towards him still sitting on the floor. “Why? WHY?"

“Dude,” Hogan shakes his head. “It’s a butt.”

“No,” Xander corrects him, “it’s a wide-angle candid of you all discussing his butt.”

“This!” I gesture at him with both hands. "THIS is the kind of insane crap he was giving me for the yearbook. Can you believe it?”

“I already told you.” Xander shrugs. “I don’t choose. I just shoot. The Tank sees what it sees. It doesn’t lie.”

“Who is Tank?” Hogan asks.

“His dumb camera!” I say, rolling my eyes for emphasis. How idiotic. I mean, who names a camera? Even if you have no friends.

Think about it, loser. Maybe that’s why you don’t.

**HOGAN**

It’s not that weird. I mean, lots of musicians name their guitars, like B.B. King had Lucille and Jimi Hendrix had Betty Jean. So he calls his camera the Tank. Dumb name, if you ask me. But I’m guessing he’s never known a girl well enough to name it after.

“Alice! You’re bleeding!” Izzy points at Alice’s bare leg. Below her shorts there are red streaks from the back of her calf down into her sock.

Alice lifts her foot up on the sink and twists awkwardly to get a better look. Blood drips in splatters on the floor.

“Totally. Gross,” Izzy says, leaning in like she’s gonna help. But instead, she backs away and flaps her hands like Noah. "Ew! Ew! There’s something in it! I can’t even...”

Alice looks at me, her big eyes asking, and before I know it I say, “Want me to check?”

She nods, thankful.

I lean in. See a glint in the gash. “Yeah...looks like there’s a piece of glass in it.”

Alice unzips her fanny pack and pulls out a few Kleenex. “Can you get it?”

I look at her other three options. Izzy grossed out. Noah spaced out. And Xander zooming in and out.

“I’ll try.” I hold her leg steady in my left hand and pinch at the corner of the glass. It takes a few tries with my thick, stupid fingers. “I think I got it.” The shard slides free easily enough, but the cut is pretty deep. I step on the sink pedal and turn on the taps. “Can you move closer to the water?”

She stumbles a bit, and I catch her with my arm, wrap it around to steady her as we try to rinse off her leg the best we can. Izzy continues her ew-ew- ew chant behind me, and Noah starts to play in the spray. He strums the streams like guitar strings until I lift my foot off the pedal and the spray stops. But he’s still rocking to whatever water song keeps playing in his head. I wonder what it sounds like.

Alice hands me the Kleenex and I wad it over the cut. Already the white tissue is blood red. “It might need stitches. Got any Band-Aids in that fanny pack?”

She shakes her head.

On the floor, Xander unzips his backpack and hands me up a roll of gray duct tape. “Will this work? Duct tape is used by NASA. The Apollo 17 crew used it to repair their lunar rover when—”

“Yeah, okay,” I snag it from him. “Thanks, Spock.”

He frowns. “I just wasn’t sure if you were familiar with the many uses of duct tape.”

I rip a strip and press it to my fur a few times before sticking it over the tissue and around her thin leg. “My football initiation involved duct tape— I’m more than familiar with this stuff. Probably still missing a few layers of skin. Hopefully, this one won’t stick as bad.” I press around the edges. “It’s not pretty, but it oughta hold for now.”

“Oh, it will hold,” Xander continues. “MvthBusters were able to suspend a car and build a functional cannon out of duct tape. They even made a sailboat, canoe, and...”

Alice lowers her foot as Xander rambles on. I turn on the taps again, this time to rinse the blood off my hands. But as the water rushes over my fingers, I don’t hear Xander’s babbling or Noah’s moaning, just a whooshing in my ears as red pools and swirls around the drain. Circling down, down, as the panic rises.

Stop.

Stop!

Stop the bleeding!

Alice puts her hand on my arm for a second. “Thanks." Her touch, her voice brings me back to the present, and I look at her. Embarrassed, she lets go.

“It could be worse,” Alice says. “I bet there are a few kids right now who wish they were locked down in a bathroom instead of a classroom. At least we have toilets...”

Izzy folds her arms. “Rrrright. I am NOT using those.”

“...and a sink with water,” Alice continues as I dry my hands.

Izzy sneers. “Definitely NOT drinking from that!”

“Well, if we were in Ms. Carter’s class,” Alice jokes, “we’d probably have to pee in the garbage can.”

“Actually, it would be blue bin for liquids,” Xander states, like it’s clearly the obvious choice, “black bin for solids.”

We all stop and stare at him. The guy is totally serious.

“You know,” he explains, like there’s a logic to it, “because feces are biodegradable.”

“You are, like, SO disgusting,” Izzy says. “Seriously. Don’t even talk to me.”

He shrugs. Takes a notebook and pencil out of his backpack and starts writing. I glance at the page. Sure enough, he’s written his recycling plan.

“Why are you writing that down?” I ask, like there’s a hope in hell he’s gonna have a good explanation.

He looks up and blinks. “I am recording it for the autopsy.” Then he goes back to his book.

And people think I’m crazy.

**XANDER**

*Writer's Craft Journal*

*Xander Watt*

*March 11,2016*

REFLECTION: Of the writing genres studied so far, which one most appeals to you?

Social Autopsies. You may not be familiar with this genre. We don’t learn them in Writer’s Craft. But maybe we should. I first learned about them in grade 9.

You may not have noticed, but I have a hard time fitting in. It was worse in grade 9. Back then, I had a lot of meltdowns. But then Mrs. O’Neill in the Resource Room taught me how to write a Social Autopsy.

It’s a dissection (just like a real autopsy), only this one does a postmortem on a conversation.

**Conversation Facts**

1. What is said often is not what is heard.
2. What is said often is not even what is meant.
3. People lie. A lot.
4. Even if they ask for the truth, most people don’t want to hear it.

No wonder conversations leave me so confused.

Mrs. O’Neill also used photographs of facial expressions. For example, in Social Autopsy #27 she held up two photos and asked, "Was your teacher looking more like this or this when she said, ‘Oh, sorry, Xander, am I boring you with this lesson?’ ”

I pointed to the expression most like Mrs. Brown’s. Mrs. O’Neill said that usually when both eyebrows are up it is a “literal question.” The person wants an answer. But that same question asked with one eyebrow up is a “rhetorical question.” One you don’t answer. Especially not with the truth. Especially not when it’s, “Yes, actually, Mrs. Brown, this is the most boring lesson you’ve given to date. And you’ve done a lot of really bad ones.”

Mrs. O’Neill told me that Mrs. Brown was being sarcastic.

**sarcastic**

/sa:’kæstik/

adjective, using irony to mock or convey contempt. Snide.

Scornful. Smart-alecky.

I wonder why it’s okay for Mrs. Brown to speak sarcastically, but it’s not okay for me to speak the truth? Either way, that Social Autopsy taught me a few things:

**Observations**

1. Don’t yawn loudly in class. Even if you are bored or tired.
2. Don’t give feedback unless asked. Even if it’s something amazing that you think everyone should know7.
3. If a teacher asks for feedback, 9 times out of 10, it’s probably a trick.

**Conclusion**

Seek clarification. Ask, just to be sure. Always.

Social Autopsies help me make sense of the illogical, things like Mrs. Brown’s moods, or group work, or even girls. I’m still dissecting that one- trying to crack the code. But Mrs. O’Neill tells me that even boys with the highest communication skills do not understand girls most of the time.

If that’s true, then there’s no chance I ever will.

Then Mrs. McNeill asked me if I enjoyed our conversations, and I said yes.

“Well, I’m a girl,” she continued. “So, what does that tell you?”

I thought about that for a minute.

**Observations**

1. Technically she is a female. Even if her hair is cut like my bus driver, Pete’s.
2. My mom is female. I like speaking to her.

**Conclusion**

I am quite comfortable speaking to middle-aged, overweight women.

But when I shared that insight with Mrs. O’Neill, something in her face made me think I should have asked for clarification first.

I do Social Autopsies on my own now. I even started collecting photos of sample expressions. Like the “you’re annoying” face. I get that one a lot. I know that one now without even looking at my face charts.

I’m more skilled with the Tank and more invisible. I have collected a wide range of expressions. But I don’t ask the subject for explanations (that usually leads to further Social Autopsies). Instead I take my photos to my grandfather at Pinehill Nursing Home. Grandpa Alex has Alzheimer’s and doesn’t remember me or our conversations, but he does know how to analyze expressions pretty well. I show him a picture and he defines the emotion: greed, joy, regret.

A group photo: “Angry mouth. Sad eyes. See how he’s looking at the other guy who is talking to that pretty girl? Jealousy if I ever saw it.”

A woman at the dinner table staring into space: “Tire. Sad, but bitter. Maybe vengeful. I’d say that poor girl got her heart broke.”

He knew all that, even if he never recognized his own daughter in the picture.

So, of all the genres, I most like Comics… but I most need Social Autopsies.

00:42:08

**HOGAN**

“I’m surROOUNded by EEEdiots,” Noah mutters, eyes up on the ceiling. “Surrounded by EEEEEdiots.”

I didn't think he could speak. I mean, just the way he acts. I didn’t think he knew how.

“Did he just call me an idiot?” Izzv says, offended.

“No. It’s Scar,” Alice says. “From *Lion King.* It’s his favorite movie. We’ve seen it a million times.”

The way she says it makes me think she’s not exaggerating.

The alarm sounds on Noah’s watch and he heads for the door.

“No, Noah,” Alice says, “we have to stay here.”

Ignoring her, he yanks on the handle and, of course, being wedged shut, the door doesn’t budge. He pulls harder, moans long and loud. His hands start flapping open and closed as he bobs back and forth, like that’s gonna open it.

She looks at me apologetically as she tries to calm him down. “It’s just...well, he knows it’s library time. This is when he shelves the books.”

She grabs his hand and leads him to the corner by the towel dispenser. I think he’s going to freak again. Run at the door or who knows what. Instead, he starts cranking out paper towel. Working the handle around and around, yelling out and clapping as the brown paper piles up on the floor.

Izzy looks at me. "How long do you think this will take?”

I like that she thinks I know. I *wish* I did. “No word from Bri?”

“No. Not about that. She’s too busy bragging about all the fun she had at Kate’s party last weekend.”

“Kate Howard?” Alice asks, over her shoulder.

“Seriously? Don’t tell me you were there!” Izzy looks at Alice in shock. “I mean, no offense but—”

“No. We’re just neighbors.” Alice cuts her off before the offense happens. Smart girl. “Gran had to call the police that night. The bonfire got way out of hand. It wasn’t safe.” She blushes then. Busies herself with cleaning up the paper towel. Probably feels stupid that she just ratted out her Gran.

Alice perks up. “Shh! Do you hear that?

All I can hear is the squeak of Noah’s cranking. But then I hear it too. Metal on metal. A slithery kinda clinking not far away. We freeze in silence, watching each other glance at the door. Finally it stops. And all is quiet again. Even Noah.

Alice whispers. “It sounds like—”

“Chains,” I say.

“Chains?” Izzy goes. “For what?”

Is it part of his stupid prank—locking in everyone who is on a lockdown? I keep my mouth shut. There’s no point in freaking them out even more.

Alice piles the paper towel in a heap on its rusted box as Noah starts pacing the small room. He drags two fingers along the brick wall like a car on a racetrack.

“There has to be a logical resolution to all this,” Alice explains as she sits down beside me.

“This isn’t a movie, Alice,” Izzy argues, gathering a few of her scattered flyers to cover a spot on the floor. She settles herself on them, like they’re a yoga mat. She crosses her tanned legs, careful not to touch the tiles. “This is real life. Not everything has a story.”

Alice smiles. “But every person does.”

I guess she’s right. We all have one—even if it’s one we’d rather forget.

"Think about it,” she continues. “Whoever this guy is, he has a plot.”

“You mean like a plan?” I ask.

“Exactly!” Alice nods, excitedly. “It’s like The Hero’s Journey, remember, Isabelle? Ms. Carter taught us that last week.”

Izzy looks at her, confused. I guess she missed that lesson.

“Every hero reaches that point of no return,” Alice explains. “And once he acts, once he crosses that threshold—everything changes.”

I know all about that. Hell, I’ve spent the past two years regretting the moment I hit that point. The moment I hit my brother.

Maybe she is on to something.

“Wait, wait,” Izzy interrupts. “Yeah, I remember now. But that’s for heroes. Like Luke Skywalker, or Katniss, or Frodo. This guy, this psycho, whoever he is—he’s no hero.”

“Well, not in our stories, no,” Alice agrees. "But he’s probably a hero in his.”

*Ya, Hulkster. Just like how you've a real hero.*

We sit in silence for a moment. Noah walks around the room tracing his finger through the grooves between the dingy bricks. He comes to the edge of the next brick, stops for a second, then changes direction. Up. Stop. Forward. Stop. Like he is finding a pattern in the chaos even if he is literally going in circles.

I think about what Alice said. It kinda makes sense. “So, what?”

“So,” Alice rolls her eyes like it is so obvious, “if we knew a bit more about him, we could probably predict the ending.”

Xander nods. "The Resolution.”

Alice counts the possibilities on her fingers. “If he was bullied, he’d want revenge. Or if he was feeling insignificant—maybe this is his way of making his mark, like you said earlier, Hogan.” She smiles at me.

I said that?

Yeah, I guess I did. I might not know the stuff teachers want, like this journey thing, but I do know what it feels like to be a nothing. A nobody. I know all about that. I can tell you what it feels like to grow up in someone else’s shadow. And with all the things Randy did so well, that shadow was huge. It sucked to feel invisible when Randy was alive. But it’s nothing compared to living in the total darkness of a dead brother’s shadow.

Alice counts off her third finger. “Or he’s just pulling a prank.” Her pinky. “Or maybe he had a test and he didn’t want to write it.”

Or maybe he’s a psychopath on a rampage. I don’t say that one out loud.

Izzy pouts. “Well, even if we knew amthing about this guy—which we don’t —what good would it do?”

“Unless...” I say, as the idea clicks on like a bare bulb, “unless you know his fatal flaw.”

Silence.

I look up to see all of them staring at me in surprise.

"What?” I shift, suddenly uncomfortable. "I read *Hamlet* in Dunne’s class. And I didn't even read the play, okay? It was the graphic novel or whatever.” I cross my arms.

Yeah, I listen in class sometimes. So what? I’ve skipped her class more times than I’ve sat through it.

Alice grins at me and I feel my scowl coming on.

“No,” she says, “you’re on to something.”

I realize she’s not laughing at me. I see it in her eyes. Something I haven’t seen from anyone in a long time. Something I thought I’d never see again.

Respect.

She looks back at the floor and taps her lip, deep in thought. “Every tragic hero does have a fatal flaw. A trait that brings him down.”

“Ya,” Izzv cuts in. “How about crazy? Lunatic? Demented? Oh, what does it matter, anyway?” Izzy moans in her melodramatic way. “We don’t even know who he is.”

They’re both right. It is a hero’s journey. And it is real life. But I hope to God I’m wrong. Because I learned something else in Dunne’s class, something I am not about to share.

In a Shakespearian tragedy—everyone dies.

**NOAH**

Roundandroundandroundandround

Paper towel rolling,

rippling

brown paper

puddles on white tiles.

Out!

—the paper needs out!

Roundandroundandroundand—

DONE!

Hummmmmmmm.

Stepping tile to tile.

Follow the rhythm of gray grooves

left

and right

and left and right

and left—

Flap-and-flutter-and-flap-and-flutter-and—

Kim? I don’t need to pee right now.

Out. I want out!

HummmmMMMm!

Finger follows cold grooves.

Where does it go?

How does it go?

Up. Stop.

Across. Stop.

Down. Stop.

Stop and go. And stop. And go.

Around and around.

HummmmMMMmMMMMmmMmmMMmmmmM!

Never getting out. Never getting out!

Trapped inside a cement song.

**ALICE**

After a few laps around the room, Noah seems quieter. Well, quiet for Noah. This isn’t where he is supposed to be, but he’s walked the room, he knows the place. He’s okay. For now. His “stimming,” as the doctors call it, has slowed—almost no slapping or hand flapping, no bobbing and waving. He settles himself next to the Hulk and starts fiddling with the costume fur.

“You okay with that?” I ask, unsure, as Noah hums and rakes his fingers up and down through the Hulk’s furry forearm.

It might turn into another “incident,” one of those awkward moments that usually ended up with Kim re-teaching Noah from her Social Stories binder. Tales about Touchy Tom who didn't know about appropriate touching. Or Snot Scott who picked his nose. Or Naked Ned who took his clothes off in public places. Those story pictograms worked, funnily enough. They made sense to Noah. At least, we thought so. And it has been some time since he’s done any of those unacceptable things.

But that doesn’t mean he won’t.

The Hulk shrugs. “As long as it keeps him quiet...and he keeps to just the arm—yeah. It’s fine.” He closes his eyes and rests his head against the wall.

“Actually, it’s kinda relaxing.”

Noah hums as he strokes, his hoarse voice low and raspy like the lazy drone of a bumblebee.

“So, like...what’s wrong with your brother?” Isabelle asks.

I hate that question—the assumption that he is “wrong.” I know she doesn’t mean it maliciously, but still.

“Geez, Izzy,” the Hulk scoffs. "There’s nothing wrong with him.”

“Well...I know that.” She blushes, unsure of how to proceed. "But he’s High Needs, isn’t he? I mean, look at him. The way he acts. The hat and everything. Come on, guys. It’s not...normal, right?”

Noah’s hum becomes a moan, but he keeps petting the Hulk’s arm.

“Who knows what normal is?” the Hulk says before I can answer. He opens one eye and glances at me. “Does he normally do this?”

“Yeah.” I smile. “Every day after school. He pets all our dogs in the kennel. It’s a great calmer—for everyone.”

“Makes sense.” Leaving his arm in Noah’s grasp, the Hulk stretches out on his back in front of Isabelle. “Izzy, you look real tense. Why don’t you get started on my belly?”

She shoves him away with her foot. “In your dreams.” He laughs and sits back up.

Izzy picks up the mascot head and fiddles with the remaining whiskers. “Just so you know, I wasn’t asking to be mean. I just...I don’t really know anyone who is...who acts like that.” She looks at me, curious. “What’s it like to have a brother like him?”

“I dunno, really.” I shrug, unsure of how to answer. “I’ve never had any other kind of brother. That’s just Noah. And he’s not retarded.” Not that anyone should be called that. “He is autistic.”

“Can he be cured?” she asks.

A fair enough question, I guess. One of many I asked Gran growing up. Why does Noah still drool and have tantrums and poop accidents like a baby? What if I catch “oddism”? Why can’t he do the things I can? Even then, I felt sorry for him and guilty about what I could do and he could not. In my dreams, Noah looks at me, laughs with me, speaks to me. In my dreams, he watches over me like a typical big brother. And when his night howling wakes me once again, because he usually only sleeps for two or three hours, I miss that brother in my dreams. I wish for him. Desperately.

“Gran showed me a documentary about autism,” I continue. “Mozart, Einstein, Hans Christian Andersen, Isaac Newton, they probably would have been diagnosed on the autism spectrum. Autism isn’t a virus or a disease, it’s a way of being and seeing.” I look at Noah. “It’s how he is. A part of who he is.”

I always wonder what the world looks like through his eyes, sounds like to his ears, or how it feels through his fingers.

“So, he’s never gonna get...better?” she asks.

I asked that question too. So I give Isabelle the same answer Gran told me. “Well, he is learning better ways to communicate. But even if science ever discovers how to separate autism from the person, who you’d be left with would not be the same person you started with.” As much as I wish for the brother in my dreams, I love the brother in my life.

Noah’s fingers stroke up the Hulk’s arm and into his hair, raking through the blond spikes.

“Woah!” the Hulk jerks away, frowning. “Personal space, man!”

My body tenses—ready to intervene, to explain, to protect.

But the Hulk simply takes Noah’s hand and puts it back on the sleeve of his costume. “Stick to the arm, okay?”

I exhale, surprised to realize that I’ve been holding my breath.

Isabelle watches them, intrigued. And I am suddenly curious about her story.

What is her normal?

I bet she doesn’t have to lock up her special things so they don’t get broken or go missing. I bet she gets to sleep in. And take vacations. And eat in restaurants without people staring. I bet she can watch whatever she wants on television without having to deal with tantrums for *Lion King.*

“What’s it like to be an only child?” I ask.

“I dunno.” She looks down, shrugs one shoulder. “Lonely.”

*Click.*

**ISABELLE**

Lonely. I can’t believe I said that.

“Well, not...lonely,” I add, “like, pathetic-loser lonely. Just...alone.”

No one says anything. They just look at me...differently.

Is that...are they...like...feeling sorry for me?

“My dad and I are close,” I add, and we are. “He travels a lot for work, though, so it’s mostly me and my mother at home.”

“Aren’t you close with her?” Alice asks.

Too close. The woman smothers me. “No. I’d rather be alone in my room than sit through another one of her lectures about my weight, about my grades, about my messy room. Ugh. Nothing I ever do is good enough for her. 'Pizza? Oh, Isabelle. You know that gives you pimples!’ I hear Jenny’s daughter got early acceptance. Isabelle, are you sure you filled out the application correctly?’

“ ‘Yes, Mother, I filled out the application correctly. You should know. You, like, made me go over it a million times.’ She even came with me on the campus tour, which was just for students, and made the guide stop at the admissions office so my mother could double-check they got my application. Who does that, I ask you?”

“Your mother,” Xander says.

“Thank you, Captain Obvious,” I snap.

“You’re welcome,” he adds. “I’ve been working on my listening skills lately.”

Awkward pause he doesn’t hear.

“Maybe your mom is just trying to be helpful,” Alice says.

“I don’t need her help!” I blurt. “She still e-mails my teachers if my marks aren’t ‘fair’ and then calls the principal if the teachers won’t listen. She even called the soccer coach when I got cut at tryouts. Next thing I know, I’m back on the team, and my mother is volunteering as the new team manager.”

“You got cut?” Hogan says, like it’s ridiculous. It was, really. I am a totally better player than Kelly Cooper. Clearly, they made a mistake. Right?

“Your mom sounds kind of like a helicopter parent,” Alice adds. “We learned about that in Anthro last semester. They like to hover over their kids.”

“A helicopter?” I snort. “My mother is a full-on aerial assault.”

“Man,” Hogan says, “you must be just itching to graduate and move out.”

I don’t want to tell him I’m not, actually. For some reason, the thought terrifies me even more than being stuck at home.

“Where are you going, anyway?” he asks.

My phone vibrates and I look down, glad to have an out from this totally awkward conversation. I drop the mascot head and scroll through. There’s a text from Bri telling me there are even more cops arriving—but still no word on who this guy is. A few Instagram alerts. And an e-mail. From Queen’s University.

Oh. My. God. This is it.

I open it.

Pleasegodpleasegodpleasegod—

Two words in and my heart sinks: “We regret...” I don’t have to read the rest to know what it says. It doesn’t matter what it says. Nothing matters now.

I didn’t get in.

**XANDER**

*January 15,2016*

*Social Autopsy #78*

*Event: Yearbook Assignment*

Given my photography skills, Mrs. O’Neill thought Yearbook would be the perfect course for my first semester. Isabelle Parks, the editor, did smile a lot at first. I thought I was cracking more of the girl-code. But as I handed in my assignments, I noticed she seemed to have “annoyed” face, even sliding into “WTF” range.

I talked to Mr. Strickland, the Yearbook teacher. And he told me there are “candid photos,” where the person doesn’t know you’re watching. And then there are “stalker photos,” where they don’t want anyone watching.

**Note to self:** Photographing students = creeper.

Photographing celebrities = paparazzi.

So, I asked Isabelle for clarification, and Isabelle said: “Consider your audience. High school kids want to see pictures of themselves. Take shots of kids doing what kids do at St. F.X. Like basketball games or clubs or kids socializing. That kind of thing.”

So I did. For the next three months, I took hundreds of pictures all over the school. I never went anywhere without the Tank. At sporting events. In the lunchroom. In the classrooms, the lab, the yearbook room. I took pictures of kids doing what kids do at high school—just like Isabelle Parks asked.

I spent hours in the darkroom developing negatives. I made her prints, four- bv-six, in black-and-white, like she asked. But when I gave her the pictures, she freaked out. Like at the far, far end of freak-out: the “ohmigod he just ran over my dog” face.

Yes. She was that upset.

The next day, I got called to the principal’s office to talk to Officer Scott, and to the guidance office, and did several autopsies with Mrs. O’Neill. But even after all that, I’m still confused.

**Facts**

* The pictures were well developed—no graininess or bubbles.
* Full tonal range. Check.
* Leading lines. Check.
* Good use of negative and positive space and light and shadow7. Check.
* Rule of thirds. Check.
* Short depth of field. Check.

**Conclusion**

* Each photograph had excellent composition and layout.
* Every one told a story. At least a thousand words.

**Hypothesis**

Mr. Reeves would have given me an A+ on those in Photography class last year. I'm sure of it.

**Facts**

* I wasn’t doing drugs or bullying or taunting.
* I wasn’t having a meltdown in the High Needs hall or sulking on the team bench.
* I wasn’t cutting or kicking or vandalizing or any of the hundreds of things the Tank caught kids doing.

**Follow-up Question**

So why, exactly, am I the one in trouble?

00:38:09

**ALICE**

Isabelle sits consumed once again by her phone. But this time, she seems awkward. Almost embarrassed. Maybe even sad. Clearly, the perfect world of Isabelle Parks isn’t so perfect.

"What the—?!” She brings the phone closer then drops it. It clatters against the tiles but Isabelle doesn’t even notice. Instead, she just hugs her knees, drops her head on her arms, and rocks.

Is she...crying?

I look at the Hulk and he shrugs, just as confused.

“Isabelle?” I tentatively touch her arm. “Umm...are you okay?”

She shudders. Definitely crying.

‘I’m sorry if I upset you,” I say. “I mean, your mom probably isn’t really a helicopter parent...”

The Hulk picks up her phone, glances at it, and turns it towards me. A photo. I recognize some kids from our school partying, red plastic cups raised as they cheer on a couple who are literally all over each other. The guy is Darren Greene. And he has her up against the doorframe, one hand pulling up her skirt, the other hiking up her leg while she runs her fingers through his hair. Hulk scrolls down the Instagram account and the photos get worse.

No wonder she’s embarrassed. I’m embarrassed just looking at them.

"Don’t worry, Izzv.” He puts the phone down. “By next weekend, there’ll be another party. Someone else will do something crazy and these pictures of you guys will be old news.”

I don’t bother reminding them that although these kinds of pictures might be forgotten, they will never disappear. Imagine her parents seeing that? Or her future boss? Like Officer Scott told us, there are dozens of scenarios where inappropriate photos can be problematic.

“Anyway,” I add, trying to be somewhat optimistic, “you can’t really see your face.”

“It’s not me,” she says, her voice muffled in her arms.

“Well, alcohol changes people,” I admit. “It makes you do crazy things. Like this one time? Gran was gone and I thought I’d try her crème de menthe. Just a taste. Next thing I know—”

“NO!” Izzy slams the floor with both hands. “Don’t you get it? I wasn’t there! I didn’t go to the party!” Her scream bounces off the tiles in piercing echoes. Noah covers his ears with his fists. “The girl. With my boyfriend. Whoever she is...she’s NOT me!”

She drops her head into her arms again and sobs.

*Click.*

I don’t know what to say. Clearly, this is way worse than my minty barf-o- rama. Worse, even, than having Gran wake me at 6:oo a.m. to clean it all up. I still can’t smell mint without gagging. I even have to brush my teeth with kids’ Grapelicious.

“It’s gonna be okay,” I promise Isabelle with more confidence than I feel. Everyone knowing your boyfriend cheated—everyone but you—how do you clean up a mess like this? Especially when it keeps spilling from one person’s phone to another.

*Click.*

“...And Xander is gonna to delete all these pictures from today, right?” the Hulk says, giving him the stare.

“Um...no,” Xander says in his monotone voice. “No. I cannot do that.”

“What? Oh, yes you can—” the Hulk swipes for the camera but Xander is too quick.

"It’s not possible!” Xander recoils into the corner, his camera clutched to his chest. "They cannot be deleted.”

"Stop!” I shout, getting their attention and surprising myself. But they aren’t listening—and they’ve totally forgotten all about Isabelle. Sighing, I look at Xander. "Why can’t you delete them?”

"It’s 35mm Ilford,” he says, like that explains everything.

"Film?” I say. "You mean, it’s not a digital camera?”

He nods, still breathless from the assault.

The Hulk scowls and sits back against the wall. "Whatever. Just get rid of them, loser. People should just mind their own business. Taking stupid pictures is what started all this mess.” He looks at Isabelle. "It’s probably just a dare. A stupid drinking game. And someone thought it would be funny to take a picture of it.”

"It’s not just that,” Isabelle moans. "It’s...” She sniffs and shudders. "I’m, like, killing myself to make this the perfect prom. Why bother? Darren’s probably going with her, whoever she is. And how am I going to tell my parents that I didn’t get into Queen’s Commerce? The first Parks in five generations. Way to disappoint the entire family! Ohmigod, my mother is going to kill me!”

I want to tell her there’s still a chance. Still time to raise her average in summer school or something. But her rant rages on.

"I can’t believe I didn’t get in.” She pauses. "But what does it matter? Why should it matter? I don’t even want to go there.”

The photo of Darren, it seems, was the last straw. The final failure that pushed her over the edge, and now it all comes gushing out. And boy, can Isabelle gush.

"I’m trying!” she shouts, her head still in her arms. "I’m doing my best. But I can’t do it all. I’m not perfect. And instead of hearing me, my mother is all ‘sure you can, sweetie, we believe in you, you’re a star, you can do it, we’re behind you a hundred percent.’” Her body tenses with every word. The pressure coils in her small fists as she pounds her leg. "And it’s push! If I make the team, they want me to be the MVP. If I run for Student Council, they tell me to go for President. My bulletin board is covered in gold stars and ribbons and honor certificates and medals. How many more do I need to win? How much more do I need to do before it’s—” she hiccups and finally gasps for breath, "before I am enough?”

We sit in stunned silence, unsure if there is more to come. I look at the Hulk, who seems as speechless as me. I shake my head at Xander as he raises his camera and, surprisingly, he lowers it.

Somebody should say something. Do something. Unsure of what else to do, I pull a Kleenex from my fanny pack and put it in her hand. She pulls it under her curtain of hair to wipe her nose.

"It’s not right,” the Hulk finally says, "the way some Chinese parents push their kids like that.”

Isabelle laughs then, a strange, sad echo in our room. "They’re not Chinese.”

The Hulk blushes. “I mean Japanese...or...whatever.”

“No.”

She lifts her head, revealing an Isabelle I’ve never seen before—one who is puffy-eyed and snotty-nosed. One who is broken. And real.

“I’m Chinese. They’re white.” She looks at the Hulk in surprise. “I’m adopted. I thought you knew that.”

The Hulk looks away. Clearly he didn’t know and feels bad about it. How would any of us know unless we’d met her family? Was it wrong to assume they were from the same culture?

“So,” I continue, trying to understand what she is really saying, “your parents put a lot of pressure on you?”

“Yes.” She hesitates. “Well, no, not exactly. I mean, they just expect it because I can. Because I should. Because I’ve been given so many opportunities.” She says it like they aren’t opportunities at all. Isabelle stares off beyond this tiny washroom. Beyond all of us. “I know it sounds ungrateful, but sometimes...sometimes I wonder what my life would have been like if they’d left me in that orphanage. If I wasn’t...chosen.”

Her voice hushes to barely a whisper. She isn’t saying it to be heard or to impress us. And for the first time, I realize that Isabelle Parks’ reputation as the “chosen one” isn’t about us at all.

**HOGAN**

“Japanese...or...whatever”—who says that?

*You did, moron.*

I thought, I mean, I just assumed her parents were Asian too. I can say Asian. That’s okay, right?

*Nice, Hulkster. Add “racist idiot" to your loser list.*

I know. I’m such an idiot. I’ll bet she’s never met anyone as stupid—

“Here’s some good news,” Xander blurts, cutting into my thoughts. He smiles at Izzy. I think he’s trying to look encouraging or friendly—but it’s just weird. Though not as weird as what he says next. “According to my observations, a quick Social Autopsy shows that you, in fact, have one less concern.”

What is it with this guy and autopsies?

“I mean...” We all look at him and his face goes red. “Umm...Mrs. O’Neill says to focus on the positive. And, well, I’m 99.8 percent positive that you no longer have to worry about Darren Greene.” He smiles again, like he’s come up with some great conclusion. "Because, clearly, he has replaced you with a different girl.”

Izzy’s mouth drops open.

Xander looks in confusion at each of us. “So...that’s good...right? Because—”

I kick his foot and he shuts up. He raises his camera and retreats behind it.

*Izzy’s* eyes fill up like two shot glasses.

“Don’t even think about pressing that button,” I snarl at Xander as he trains his lens on her. Is he for real?

“Whatever,” Izzv says, wiping her nose. “I know I look bad now...” Like she could ever look bad. "But it’s nothing compared to the other ones he took.”

She pauses for second, then slowly pulls up her left sleeve. I think she’s showing us some bracelet until I see the scars. Three of them. Red, angry slashes against the smooth skin of her inner arm. Like those lines people scratch on a cell wall. Counting down to freedom.

“Iz!” Without even thinking I reach out and squeeze her arm, like it just happened, as if by holding it tight I can take away some of the pain.

She avoids my eyes.

“Are they from an animal or something?” I say, knowing they aren’t. “Bites or scratches from a dog?”

“Those are not from a dog,” Alice adds, like I’ve offended her just by suggesting it. “A dog would never do that. Well, not any dog I’ve ever known.”

I know she’s right. The clean cuts. The short, straight lines. Those marks are intentional. A map of the dark places Izzy has been. But I want to give her an out. First the picture of Darren, and now this? It’s too much.

“Well,” I say to Alice, “not all dogs are as well trained as yours.”

“It’s not from a dog.” Izzy looks up at Xander for a second. Then, breathing out, she lets it all go. “I was here late working on the yearbook, you know, trying to get it just right.” Her voice is quiet. “The deadline was looming. And though I’d been accepted at a few other universities, Alyssa and Trev got early acceptances to Queen’s Commerce, but I hadn’t heard anything yet. And I started to wonder if maybe I wouldn’t. And Darren was being weird. Cold. I could tell he was avoiding me. Things were getting worse. And my mother was constantly on my case. And I had this panic growing inside of me. A great big bubble of anxiety. What if the yearbook isn’t good enough? What if everyone hates it? What if I don’t get into Queen’s? What if Darren doesn’t love me any more? And the X-acto knife was on the desk and, I dunno. I just did it.” She traced the lines with her finger. “It hurt. A lot. But it was...real. And it felt like...” She looks around like she’s searching for the words. “Like I could finally breathe.”

She stops and takes a deep breath again and her shoulders relax.

It’s done now. Out. And even if she seems smaller somehow, deflated like an old balloon, I see in her eyes she’s okay with it. Less tense.

“I know, it sounds crazy,” she says. “Maybe I am. But I couldn’t talk to anyone about it. Not even Brianne. No one could ever know.” She looks back at Xander. “And then a few weeks later, he hands in his photos for the yearbook. A stack of black-and-white candids, stupid shots he took around the school. I hardly looked at the others, not when I saw the one of me.” She stops. “And I saw it then, in that picture—I saw who I really was.”

Izzy pulls both sleeves over her hands and draws up her knees, hugging them close as though she’s trying to hold what’s left of herself together.

*Click.*

“Sometimes,” she says, “sometimes it’s just really hard being me.”

Alice opens her mouth to say something, but Izzy cuts her off.

“And don’t tell me how great things are, because I know that. Or how great my life is—because I know that, too.”

By the way Alice snaps her lips closed, I can tell that’s exactly what she was going to say.

“But, see, when you guys make mistakes, it’s okay.” She looks at me, then— me, the King of Mistakes. “It’s expected. Because, well, you’re you.”

I want to tell her it’s hard for me, too. She has no idea what it’s like to be me either. “Izzy, you’re not the only—”

Alice’s hand rests lightly on my arm and I stop. Look at her. Without even saying a word, she tells me to wait. Let Izzy speak. Just listen. I nod and Alice smiles. It’s weird how we sorta read each other’s mind. But cool weird.

Izzy keeps on talking. “MVP, Student Council President, leading actress, Yearbook Editor—and this year’s book is the best one yet. I am successful at whatever I do. I’m not bragging. It’s true. I’ve never failed. Ever.”

“Must be nice,” I mutter.

“It’s not.” Izzy rests her chin on her knees. “Failing is not an option. My mother wouldn’t allow it. She does everything she can to prevent it. I keep trying to live up to that impossible standard. It’s like, I keep clearing the bar, and they just keep on raising it. At some point it’s all gotta come crashing down. The truth is...” her dark eyes fill with another shot of tears, “I’m not good enough. Not for Queen’s Commerce. Not for Darren. And not for my mother.”

No one speaks for a moment. What would we say?

“It’s so funny, you know?” Izzy wipes her eyes with her ball of Kleenex. “I couldn't wait to grow up. But just the thought of leaving St. Francis Xavier, of graduating next month—it terrifies me.” She swipes her cheek as another tear spills. “I know who I am here, what I can do. Where I fit in. But out there—in the real world—it’s like...I will be nobody.”

I look at Alice. Hope that she’s got some wise words to say. She’s smart, probably good with that kind of thing. But even Alice is silent. Just sitting there, staring at the floor deep in thought. Izzy looks at me then, like she’s waiting for an answer. I look away. I’ve got nothing for her.

The truth is, she’s just nervous, that’s all. Izzy’ll come out on top. She always does. She’s just anxious about heading into the unknown.

But, me? I can’t wait to leave this hellhole school where everyone is trying to help make me into something. I want to get away, to leave home, to get lost in that unknown where nobody knows about me or my brother.

Hell, I can’t wait to finally be a nobody.

**ISABELLE**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| BRI: | They’ve got the footage from the atrium camera |
| IZZY: | Do they know who he is? |
| BRI: | Not yet.  How you holding up? |
| IZZY: | Worst. Day. Ever. |
| BRI: | I know, right? |
| IZZY: | I know about the party. About Darren.  Why didn’t you tell me? |

BRI: WHAT?!

Who told you?

IZZY: I saw the pictures on Kate’s account.

BRI: OMG! Iz, I am SO SORRY.

IZZY: You should be. Why didn’t you tell me? A best friend would tell.

BRI: You’re right. I should have. I just didn’t know what to say.

IZZY: For a start...how about: your boyfriend is a lying ass.

BRI: I know. I know.

IZZY: What happened?

BRI: I dunno. He was drinking a lot and I guess things

just got out of hand.

You know how he is.

IZZY: Ya.

BRI: And, like I said, you’ve been different lately.

He said things weren’t going good between you.

IZZY: :(l know.

BRI: And next thing I know...we got carried away.

IZZY: Wait... WHAT?!

WE??!

That’s YOU in the pictures?!

BRI: I thought you knew!

You just said you knew.

IZZY: I said HE cheated.

OMG! I didn’t know it was with MY BEST FRIEND.

I can’t believe you guys.

What the hell is wrong with you?

BRI: I’m so sorry.

Please believe me, Iz.

I never meant for that to happen.

IZZY: Don’t EVER talk to me again.

I’m DONE.

With BOTH of you.

00:34:50

**ALICE**

We’ve been in lockdown for a good twenty-five minutes, though it feels so much longer. Surely there must be some kind of update. Things have gotten quiet since the last blasts, but they haven’t let us out yet. Which must mean the shooter is still out there. Somewhere.

“Any news?” I ask Isabelle as she furiously texts.

“Yes! Get this, that girl in the picture?” She clenches her jaw. “It’s Bri. As in, my-best-friend-Bri, all over my boyfriend.” She slams the phone down on the floor. “She knew things weren’t good between me and Darren lately—the perfect time for her to weasel in. They freaking deserve each other.”

No one speaks.

“Isn’t he going to play football for California State next year?” the Hulk finally asks.

"Long-distance relationships don’t usually last,” I add, like I know amthing about dating that doesn’t come from a novel or the old Turner Classic Movies Gran and I watch on Friday nights. “It might be for the best, Isabelle. Even if it doesn’t look like that now.”

“Dull!” She rolls her puffy, red eyes. “I KNOW that! I get it. We talked about breaking up after graduation—well, he talked about it. But in my heart I always hoped...” Her voice trails off.

I finish it for her. “That one day he’d wake up, change who he is, and realize how much he really loves you.” It’s a classic TCM plot*—The King and I, The Sound of Music,* all the greats have it.

Isabelle smiles wistfully. “Absence makes the heart grow fonder. That’s what they say, right?”

“Not any guy I know,” the Hulk mutters. “More like, what happens in Vegas stays in Vegas.”

Clearly he needs to watch some better programming.

“I thought he’d wait until after prom.” Isabelle chews her lip. “That he’d give me that, at least—after all I’ve done for him. But no!” She shakes her head. “He goes behind my back with my best friend and they make a fool out of me in front of the whole school.”

“It’s not the whole school,” I correct her. I’m trying to help her keep things in perspective. “We didn’t hear about it. Not everyone knows.”

“Well, everyone that matters. No offense.” And just like that, the old Isabelle is back. Making me keep things in perspective too.

**HOGAN**

“Not to be insensitive,” Alice goes, “because I know you have a lot going on right now, but I just wondered...if Bri might have mentioned amthing about the, urn, lockdown?”

Izzy sighs, irritated by any drama outside of her own. “I dunno. I think the police are checking the atrium’s security cameras.”

“I didn’t even know we had atrium cameras,” Alice says, surprised.

“Me either,” Xander mutters.

We sit in silence. Izzy notices a white paper among the yellow flyers on the floor. She picks it up and glances at it. “This e-mail has your name on it, Alice.”

“Oh, I must have dropped it when I fell.” Red-faced, Alice practically snatches it from Izzy’s hand, but not before Iz reads, “University of British Columbia?

Bad news?”

“Something like that.” Alice looks away as she crumples it.

“UBC Creative Writing Program?” Xander says. “I’m surprised you got a rejection. You are, by far, the most talented writer in Ms. Carter’s class.”

Alice fidgets like she doesn’t know what to say or where to look. Her face glows bright red.

“Are you angry?” Xander asks. “Was I not supposed to say that?”

“No, you’re right,” Izzy says. “She’s blushing because you pointed out something true. I might not have remembered your name at first, Alice, but I’ll never forget your stories. Especially that one about the pirate queen. That was awesome.”

“And the dog one,” Xander goes. "Remember that?”

“Thanks, guys.” A small smile pulls the corners of her mouth. “Actually it’s... a letter of acceptance.”

We all congratulate her, and her shy smile widens until her cheeks dimple. Even her eyes are glowing like she’s lit up from the inside and not from the shaft of afternoon sunlight coming in through the small window up in the corner. Beside her, Noah waves his hand in front of his face, as if strumming the beams.

Alice rests her hand on his leg and he slows. Her smile fades. “But I’m not going.”

“What?” Izzy’s jaw drops. “That’s, like, one of the top schools in the country. Seriously, that’s huge, Alice. You HAVE to go!”

“I can’t,” she says, sadly. “I just...can’t.”

“It’s because of Noah, isn’t it?” I say, not totally getting how I knew. Just that I did.

She meets my eyes and nods.

“What about your parents?” Iz asks. “Can’t they take care of him?”

“We live with my grandmother,” Alice says. “And our mom...isn’t around.”

“Is she dead?” Xander blurts in his doofus way. Jerk.

“No,” Alice says, “my mom left when I was about three and Noah was seven. Like, literally, left us with Gran and Grampa. People say their dogs are ‘going to live on the farm’ when they can’t handle them any more. Apparently, my mom thought it was okay to do that with her kids.” She stops for a second and chews her lip.

“At least you know who your mom is,” Izzy says. “I’ll never know my birth mother.”

Leave it to Izzy to try and trump it with her story. Nothing supportive ever starts with the words “at least”—

At least Randy didn't suffer.

At least your parents have you.

At least you had a brother.

“I do know who my mother really is,” Alice says. “That’s part of the problem.”

Noah hums like a wasp’s nest. He’s getting louder, winding up inside, or something. Alice finally lets go of his leg and he jumps up and starts pacing again.

“I get it, though,” she continues. “A young single mom. Noah was in pretty bad shape then, too. Violent. Didn’t communicate. Hard to manage. Leaving him at Gran and Grampa’s farm was probably the best thing for him.”

“But what about you?” Izzv asks.

Alice bites her lip again.

“See?” Xander goes. “Her face is red. You said something true.”

“It doesn’t matter what I want,” Alice tries to explain. “Grampa left the farm to Gran—”

“So he’s dead?” Xander cuts in again.

Izzy rolls her eyes.

“Yes. He died this past winter,” Alice explains. “Gran said she couldn't keep the kennels and run the farm and take care of Noah all on her own. They only let him attend high school until he’s twenty-one, so that means this is his last year here at St. F.X., too. So I told Gran, she isn’t on her own. That I’m not going anywhere. That I’m not Mom.” She shrugs. “Gran needs me. Noah needs me.”

It’s like I’m seeing her for the first time. Not the scrawny klutz that came tripping into the washroom. Not the blushing nerd who can’t shut up. Just a girl who cares—a sibling who would do anything for her brother. No matter what the cost.

Maybe that’s what siblings are supposed to be like.

“What about what you need, Alice?” Izzy’s voice brings me back. But I know what Alice is going to say, even before I hear it.

“My needs don’t really matter,” she says. “It’s always about Noah.”

Like how it’s always about Randy. Even now.

“Don’t get me wrong, I don’t always like it,” Alice says. “But that’s just the way things are.”

And you can’t change the way things are.

**Alice**

The Hulk is watching me, but his expression is different, somehow. He gets it. He knows what I’m talking about.

But Isabelle clearly doesn’t. “Sounds like you’re a supporting character in your own life.” She shakes her head, disgusted. “It’s your life, Alice. You should be the lead.”

I don’t expect her to understand. “It is what it is.”

“It’s not fair!” Isabelle gives me that look- the one I see countless times from strangers whenever Noah stims or hums, freaks or flaps, or bobs or babbles- whenever he does the million things that make him Noah.

They look at me with pity.

I hate that the most. Pity doesn’t do me any good, and I should know. I’ve wallowed in it many nights. Right around 4:00am., when those questions I buried all day came bubbling back up:

Why?

Why did she leave me?

Why didn't she take me with her?

Why doesn’t she call more often?

Why doesn’t she love me?

Gran says Mom doesn’t have the strength to deal with Noah. Or the guts to face the guilt. It’s just easier for her to stay away. To keep busy. To forget.

The Hulk speaks, his voice strangely quiet. “Life’s not fair.”

“Not fay-yar,” Noah echoes, in his Scar voice, “not fay-ar. Life’s not fay-ar.” He has the words and the British accent down. I wonder if he has any idea what it really means.

The Hulk continues, “But you can’t run from it—no matter how hard it gets. Because if you start running—you just never stop.” He looks at me, in me. He understands. “I don’t know about missing moms, but I'd give up anything...anything to have my brother here.”

And for the first time in my life, I see a look, not of pity, but of longing. The Hulk wants what we have, Noah and I.

I meet his eyes. Hold them for a moment. “Thanks...Hogan." He shrugs it off like it’s no big deal. But it is, for me it’s huge.

“Okay—but your brother is definitely dead,” Xander blurts at Hogan. “That I know because—”

“Xander!” Isabelle cuts him off. “Geez, don’t you have a filter?”

“No.” Confused, he looks down at his camera. “I never use one. I’d rather see things as they really are.”

We sit in awkward silence, looking everywhere but at each other.

“He’s right. It’s true.” Hogan lets out a deep breath. “It’s been two years, I should be able to at least say it.”

But he doesn’t.

Xander tilts his head and stares at Hogan. "But is it true that you killed him?”

I gasp. People gossip like that behind Hogan’s back—but only Xander is dumb enough, or maybe honest enough, or brave enough to say it to his face.

*Hulk Hogan killed his brother.*

*I heard he stabbed him in the change room.*

*No, he squashed his head like a melon—right between his palms.*

*Blood everywhere.*

It can’t be true, right? It has to be just a rumor. It’s too terrifying, too unbelievable. Hogan stares at the splatters of red drops on the white tiles. Blood from my cut. Nobody moves, or speaks, or even breathes.

“I did it,” he finally says, his voice barely a whisper. “I killed my brother.”

**HOGAN**

Randy and me were raised to fight. Hell, my parents even named us after their WWE heroes Macho Man Randy Savage and Hulk Hogan. That was us. “The Mega Powers.” He was two years older than me. Two years stronger. Two years smarter. And I hated it. Hated losing all the time.

No matter how I tried as a kid, Randy always won. Beating me, literally, with his chokeholds and atomic drops, his hair-pull hangman, and then, finally, lumping off our bunk beds in his signature finish: a diving elbow drop. “Oooooh yeah!”

“Randy!” Mom would yell from the kitchen. “Stop picking on your brother!” He’d laugh then. And that only made it worse—that I needed my mom to

save me.

"Had enough, Hulkster?” he’d tease with that stupid smirk. And, room spinning, I’d get up and go back for more, when really I should’ve stayed down.

I should have stayed down.

In grade 10, I made the St. F.X. football team—much to Randy’s surprise. And I was good—much to mine. All that wrestling, all those years learning to deke Randy’s grasp, learning to push back, I guess it paid off. In tryouts, I blew past the O-line and broke through the block. Before I knew it, I was diving for Randy. Bodv-slammed him before he had a chance to throw. I stood up over him, held out my hand. But he slapped it away.

Holy crap, it felt good.

“Nice hit, Hogan,” Coach Dufour said, coming to stand beside me. He smacked my shoulder pad. “Looks like there’s a new King in town.”

Everyone laughed. Well, everyone but Randy.

Coach double-teamed me, made it even harder for me to get at Randy. But that made me push even more. Pretty soon, it got to the point where Coach pulled me aside. “You can ease up a bit when you break through the line. Just in practice. I can’t have you breaking our quarterback.”

I felt like my chest was going to burst. He might as well have shouted at me to “stop picking on your brother.”

Everything changed then. People noticed me. Randy wasn’t the KING. He was just R. KING now. I smiled when Mom sewed his new name patch on his game jersey, and even more when she sewed mine: H. KING. This was his last year on the team. But I was just getting started. Who knew how far I could go?

Even Coach said that.

And at the home opener, I had this feeling their quarterback was gonna pass to the tight end, so I broke off the line and stuck with my man. My gut was right, and next thing I know, I’m catching an interception. An interception! I even ran it back the length of the field for the winning touchdown as Izzy and her friends jumped and cheered me on. For the first time, I felt like the Fabulous, the Incredible, the Amazing Hogan King. Hell, after I reached the end zone I even did Hulk Hogan’s signature move—cupped my hand to my ear to hear the crowd roar.

And did they ever.

I was a new man after that. I was someone people noticed and admired. I wasn’t Randy’s little brother; I was the Hulk. I could do anything. Maybe even get Izzy. Perfect, amazing Isabelle Parks. Because if I had her, then I’d have it all. And when she kissed me at the bonfire that night—I felt like that shooting star overhead. I thought it was a sign, that streak of light.

But I know now, it was what it was. A hunk of nothing, burning up and fizzling out as it fell.

“Nice game, loser,” Randy said in the locker room after our defeat in game five. It was my fault. I’d played terribly. Whatever streak I’d been on early in the season had fizzled out. Their running back broke through my gap twice, and even the quarterback snuck around my end—all of them touchdowns.

All of them my fault. Even the interception, the gift thrown right to me, hit me in the helmet and hobbled free.

He stood in his underwear, still dripping from his shower as he rubbed his hair with a towel. “Maybe football isn’t your sport. Why don’t you see if Isabelle wants you on her cheerleading team? No, wait, they won’t want you doing the lifts.” He laughed, and threw the wet towel at me. “You might fumble a cheerleader.”

“The way he’s playing,” Darren Greene echoed, “fumbling might be the only thing he’ll ever do with a cheerleader!”

The room exploded in jeering.

“You’re right,” I admitted, “their three TDs were on me. But our TDs...or lack of them,” I turned to face Randy, “dude, that’s on you.”

His smile dropped.

I waved my arm at the team. “They can’t catch...if you can’t throw.”

The room went silent. I’d broken some unwritten rule, I guess. Or maybe, maybe I’d hit the nail on the head. He’d been off his game just the same as me. Only nobody called him on it. Nobody ever called Randy on anything.

I opened my locker to grab my shirt and I never saw him coming. My face hit the metal doors and he pummeled my side. I shoved back, hard. He staggered into his teammates, who had circled around, but they pushed him up, pushed him on. It was our WWE bedroom brawl all over again, only this time he had an audience and they were cheering his name.

Ran-DEE! Ran-DEE! Ran-DEE!

I was on their team too, but no one was cheering for me. I realized then how stupid I was to think I mattered. A lineman, like me, was expendable. A finger. One of many. But a quarterback, well, he was the heart of the team— and I’d stupidly just taken a stab at it.

I looked at them all chanting his name, eager to see me get my ass kicked.

Screw them! I turned my back. Screw them all!

“C’mon,” Randy taunted. He shoved my shoulder. Once. Twice.

My fists balled.

“Let’s go...Hulkster,” he said, sarcastically. “Showr us what you got.”

He jumped me from behind. Slipped his palm up around my neck in a half nelson. And, just like that, he had me locked in, driving me to my knees. I felt it bubbling up inside me, that familiar rage. The one only Randy could stir up.

“Quit it!” I yelled, breaking free and shoving him hard. My chest heaved.

“Quit it!” he mimicked. “Or what? You gonna tell Mom?”

He smirked, that stupid smile I always hated. “Maybe I should give Isabelle a call. Show her what it’s like to be with a real Macho Man.” He thrust his hips in and out. “Oooooh yeah!”

I don’t remember running at him or tackling him or even hitting the floor, next thing I knew we were punching, wrenching, kneeing—in a full-on, all- out brawl. Only we weren’t kids goofing around on carpets and mattresses, we were almost five hundred pounds of muscle and madness.

Randy slammed my head into the floor, and I saw stars explode and fizzle. When I came to on my back, he was standing on the bench just over me, getting the crowd wild as he readied for his classic diving elbow drop. The one I’d seen a million times before.

Only this time...I struck first.

I kicked hard. Swept his legs out from under him. Randy fell back off the bench. Back into the lockers, slamming his head against the corner of the one I’d left open.

He dropped.

“Ooooooo!” the guys shouted. “Nice one, Hogan!”

But I didn’t care what they thought. I didn't care about any of that as I crawled over to Randy. He hadn’t moved. And Randy never stayed down.

“Randy?” I turned his face towards me. His eyes were open—but not seeing.

A dark gash on the side of his head oozed red. It ran into a sticky puddle that spilled wider and wider with every second.

“Holy shit!” I shook him slightly. “Randy! Randy! Wake up!” I looked at the team, now silently gathered around us, the terror I felt mirrored and multiplied on their faces.

“Somebody!” I yelled. “Get help!”

I lifted Randy’s head and pressed my palm over the wound.

That’s what you’re supposed to do, right? Stop the bleeding?

Stop the bleeding!

STOP THE BLEEDING! Please God, make it stop!

But the blood oozed hot and slick through my fingers; my brother’s life, pooling red in the grooves of the gray-tiled floor as it ran to the drain.