

## Start Over

Hazel arrived home from the veterinary clinic to the apartment she shared with her boyfriend. After ten hours at work – constantly moving, seeing appointments, attending to patients, never sitting – her feet felt on fire and her left leg ached worse than usual. From the doorway she could see the entire apartment, living room, kitchen, the door to their bedroom. It was a small place made smaller by too much stuff. Matt’s stuff, her stuff, their stuff. The clutter engulfed every flat surface.

Matt was home, already on the couch streaming old episodes of Supernatural. He paused the episode when he saw her walk in the door.

“Hey, honey. How was work?”

“Fine,” she said. “How was your day?”

“You don’t sound fine.”

“Honestly, I don’t really want to talk about it.” She took off her jacket and joined him on the couch, draping her left leg over his lap. She sighed as he massaged her leg, a nightly routine recommended by her physical therapist.

Hazel didn’t really want to talk about *anything*. She pulled out her phone and opened her latest downloaded game. Last night she had spent all of her insomnia induced free time trying to get her avatar out of the village starting point and up the Mountain of Destiny.

“What’s the game of the week?” Matt asked.

“Adventure Freely: Mountain of Destiny. It’s stupid really. The story line is derivative – defeat the evil wizard and save your village from destruction – but I like the graphics and the format. Every scene you’re offered multiple option and the game progression depends on your

choices. It's like those old Choose Your Own Adventure stories we used to read as kids." Hazel didn't tell him she had named the avatar Alice. It would not go over well.

"Sounds fun," he said and started his show again. He didn't understand how she could spend hours at a time on the couch playing on her phone. He continued massaging her leg and she became engrossed in the game.

Alice walked across the screen up a steep path. The scenery scrolled so that as Alice walked, she remained in the middle of the screen and the background moved behind her, pine trees along the path, snow-capped mountains in the back. The path became steeper; the forest disappeared giving way to boulder fields.

A text box popped up:

**You travel along a mountainous trail, rocky and barren. You come upon a bridge leading to the other side of a crevasse. As you start to cross, a troll jumps out in front of you blocking your way.**

**You:**

- a) Ignore the troll and continue to walk past**
- b) Hit the troll with an item from your inventory**
- c) Offer the troll all of your gold**
- d) Turn back**
- e) Start over**

Previously, Hazel had selected the first two options and the troll had thrown Alice off the bridge both times. She tapped on option C.

The text box appeared:

**The troll takes your gold.**

**“You may pass.”**

The troll disappears over the side of the bridge. Alice walks across and continues up the mountain.

Matt finished massaging her leg.

“Hazel, I reheated leftovers from last night,” he said, interrupting her game play. “Are you hungry?”

She shook her head. Thinking about eating. Thinking about the messy kitchen. No longer immersed in the game, the thoughts triggered her anxiety. She felt it physically, a tightness in her chest that felt like a fist wrapped around her heart squeezing, making it hard to breathe.

She fixated on the thoughts. The mess. He wouldn’t take care of it. She always had to take care of it. Messy to him was a whole order of magnitude above her threshold. The ache in her chest and the negativity towards Matt started a sequence of images and thoughts. She couldn’t stop or mitigate them in any way. The image: dishes on the counter. The thought: *Matt never does the dishes*. The image: the exam room, owners crying. The thought: *I don’t know what’s wrong with the dog. What did I miss?* The image: the purpled haired teenager on the bus pushing past her today. The thought: *What a bitch!*

Each image and thought gave strength to the grip on her heart. *Oh god, here it comes*. She was powerless to prevent the next images. They always came in flashes: twisted metal, broken glass, blood, ambulances, firetrucks. And then the smell would creep in: the burning rubber and oil, gasoline, the metallic tang of blood.

“Hazel!” he said, shaking her.

Her attention refocused on him; the images and smells faded. She let go of the breath she didn't realize she was holding, but the fist still gripped her heart.

"How bad was it this time?"

"I'm fine."

"That's not what I asked."

Hazel ignored him and returned to her phone. Games were the only thing she found that would block out the panic for any length of time.

"I think you went back to work too soon," he said. "You were getting better, but now you're almost as bad as you were just after... maybe you should take a longer break."

"We can't afford for me not to work. Especially with all of the medical bills." She didn't look up from her phone as she spoke. Then she added, as if it wasn't obvious to him, "I don't want to talk about it."

The game was open. Alice walked along the mountain path shivering.

The text box appeared:

**Freezing wind whips around you. The snow reduces visibility. The light begins to fade and you lose all feeling in your fingers and toes. A twinkling light breaks through the darkness.**

**You:**

- a) Persist in your trek, convinced the light must mean a dwelling and a fire are near**
- b) Give up and lie down**
- c) Turn back**
- d) Start over**

Hazel selected option A.

**You persist in your trek. The snow gets worse and in the diminishing light. You lose the path and walk off the cliff's edge, plunging to almost certain death.**

A second text box appeared:

**The feeling of falling overwhelms you and you lose consciousness.**

Then the screen went black and the app closed itself. Hazel couldn't get it to reopen. A groan escaped her lips.

"What?" Matt asked, pausing his show again.

"I keep dying in this stupid game."

He looked at her, his eyes wide, his mouth drawn tight. "Maybe you should play a different game-"

"Maybe you should leave me alone," she said and got up from the couch. It was childish. She knew that. But lately her reactions seemed completely beyond her control. She walked out of the room studiously avoiding eye contact with Matt. She didn't want to see the look of hurt mingled with reproach.

She dressed for bed, studiously avoiding looking at the scars on her arms and left leg, souvenirs from the multiple surgeries required to put her back together. Ignoring them was futile. Working to not think about them was still thinking about them. The fist around her heart squeezed again. The images started to flash. The oncoming car speeding towards them. The impact.

The phone chimed and vibrated twice. A text box appeared on her lock screen with "AF" and a small graphic of the app, a yeti with a snow topped peak in the background. Underneath

the icon it read, “You have been saved by the mighty eagle, King Golden Feathers. Open the game to Adventure Freely!”

When the notification appeared, the images stopped and the pressure in her chest loosened a fraction, enough to give relief. She climbed into bed and played the game until her eyes could no longer focus. Then she closed the app and turned off the light. Tonight, sleep came easier than usual, but deeper sleep always locked her tighter into the dream. It was the same dream every night. The worst night on endless repeat.

*The high beams are on, illuminating both lanes of the empty highway. The colonnade of pines barely visible at the edge of the lights. Hazel and Alice are singing along to Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers.*

*“And I’m a bad boy cause I don’t even miss her, and I’m a bad boy for breaking her heart” they both sing at their loudest. “And I’m free! Free falling. Yeah I’m free, free falling!”*

*Hazel sees it on the edge of her vision. The car is moving so fast, she doesn’t process what is happening until the car has jumped the median and is a second from hitting them. There is no time to cry out, to tell Alice to swerve. The second is gone and the entire world is screeching, grinding metal, shattering glass, tumbling. She is upside down, held tightly in place by her seat belt. Blood flows down her face, its metallic scent filling her nose, mixing with the smell of burning rubber and oil. Alice hangs half out of her seatbelt. She is motionless. Her body is broken, neck bent and legs twisted in an impossible configuration.*

*She screams, “Alice!”*

*The screeching, grinding of metal has stopped and an eerie silence fills the air. Her voice echoes in her head.*

*“Alice!” She wails until her throat is raw and her voice is raspy.*

*Somehow the stereo is still playing and Tom Petty continues to sing, "I'm gonna free fall out into nothing, gonna leave this world for a while. And I'm free, free falling!"*

She woke up the same way she did every night, screaming convinced she was covered in blood and trapped in the car again. She flailed. The sheets bound her legs. Her panic intensified. Suddenly, Matt was there. He held her tightly creating a soothing pressure that felt like a protective bubble, distancing her from the dream.

She knew more than just her nightmares were putting a strain on him, that they were both suffering from her bad moods and irritableness. Despair settled on her, a heavy suffocating weight that smothered the panic and left in its place emptiness. Even as he held her, she felt alone and disconnected.

Pushing away from him she said, "I'm getting up. You can go back to sleep." He sighed and let his arms fall away, then returned to the living room without speaking. Her phone chimed and vibrated twice as she was getting back into bed. The AF icon appeared on her lock screen, but something was different. Underneath the icon it read, "You have survived another nightmare! Open the game to Adventure Freely!"

"Weird," she said and dismissed the notification. It was almost three in the morning. The panic from the nightmare faded but sleep was a feral and elusive creature, hard to catch and impossible to hold on to. It was not going to return to her again tonight.

She got out of bed and dressed in her running clothes. Matt was already asleep on the couch, the TV on with the sound muted. She decided against waking him. Hadn't she disturbed his sleep enough tonight?

The neighborhood was still with an eerie quiet that only happened in the city at three in the morning. Ignoring the pain in her leg, she headed north up the hill through the Presidio, ear

buds in, bass heavy techno turned up. The music and the rhythm of her feet were barely enough distraction to let her mind wander.

An impulsive thought occurred to her, and without it fully conscious in her mind, she continued running until she was on the Golden Gate Bridge, the orange-red railing to her right and the freezing water of the San Francisco Bay a thousand feet beneath her. She stopped to stare down into the dark. Images of that night flashed. The twisted metal. The blood. Alice's body. Her memory of Tom Petty's voice cut through her techno. *And I'm free falling out into nothing...*

Since that night Hazel had been falling. She was desperate to stop, for the nightmares to be over, but the fall seemed endless. She looked left and right. The bridge police, who arrested would-be jumpers, were not around. It would be quick. The pain would be over. Matt could go back to a normal life. Neither of them would have to deal with her deteriorating mental state.

Her phone chimed and vibrated twice. She looked at the screen. The AF game icon appeared followed by a text box:

**You stand on the precipice.**

**You:**

**a) Jump**

**b) Turn back**

**c) Start Over**

Confused, Hazel ignored the phone. She checked her surroundings. The road was still empty. The wind whipped around her, its icy bite ripping through her clothes. If she jumped, would she feel the freezing water engulf her, wrap her in its numbing embrace? Or would she lose consciousness before impact? Without further hesitation she climbed up on the railing and jumped off.



She was falling.

Falling.

Everything went black.

Then she was standing on the bridge again, looking over the edge of the railing, contemplating the jump. How cold will the water be when she hit it? Would she feel it? Would the impact of her body on the water be enough to knock her out? She felt queasy imagining the plummet over the edge.

Suddenly it came back and the falling was no longer a fantasy, but a memory. The rushing of the wind around her, the waiting for the falling to stop, the shattering of her bones on impact on the water, and the regret. It all crashed into her and she doubled over in pain.

Her phone chimed and vibrated twice pulling her out of the memory. She looked at the screen.

The AF game icon appeared followed by the message:

**You stand on the precipice.**

**You:**

**a) Jump**

**b) Turn back**

**c) Start Over**

Hazel tentatively placed her finger on option B. The text bubble disappeared. There was a rushing sound and the edge of her vision blurred. The wind was gone. She heard Matt's voice.

"Hazel. Hello?"

She looked up from her phone. She was standing in the entrance of their apartment dressed as if she had just come home from work, in scrubs and a puffy jacket. Matt was sitting on the couch watching an old episode of Supernatural. The dishes were piled on the counter. She

looked back down at her phone. The AF app was open and the screen was black. Her thinking was sluggish. Where had she been a moment before? Images flashed. Not the painful images punctuated with the tightening grip on her heart. Just images. A run. The bridge. Falling. It had to be a dream.

She hesitated in the doorway. She could join Matt but she wanted time to figure out what just happened, to try to find a reasonable explanation for why a moment ago she thought she had been on the bridge and now was standing in her doorway.

“Hazel,” Matt said more sharply this time. “Are you going to come in and shut the door?” The concerned look on his face mitigated the exasperated tone in his voice.

Her phone chimed and vibrated twice. She opened the app. There were no graphics just the text box in white on a black background. It read:

**You are exhausted. Confusion and dread steal over you.**

**You:**

- a) Sit on the couch**
- b) Go to the pub**
- c) Turn back**
- d) Start Over**

What the hell was going on with the game? She was creeped out but tentatively curious. Not really expecting anything to happen, she selected option B.

The app closed out. There was a rushing sound and the edge of her vision blurred. Stale beer permeated the air and a live band played “Smells like Teen Spirit.” She looked up from her phone. She was in the Tavern, three blocks from her apartment. The lights were dim but she could see her friend Andy standing at the bar.

“What are you drinking tonight?” Andy asked once Hazel joined her. “Your usual? How’s the leg? You still like your PT? Well, whatever you are doing, keep it up. You look great!”

Hazel tried to ask her what she was doing at the bar on a Tuesday, but when she opened her mouth different words came out:

“The band sounds terrible. Do you think we should tell Steven?”

“God no. Practicing with the band is the only thing that gets him out of the house. I don’t want to do anything to ruin that,” she said laughing.

Hazel took a closer look at the stage. Andy’s husband was behind the drums doing his best Dave Grohl impression. Comprehension came slowly, a fog dissipating in the morning light. This was last month, the night before she started back at work. Hazel had met Andy at the Tavern to celebrate her return to semi-normalcy and watch Steven perform. The fist around her heart had been a fraction below intolerable. She could feel the phantom of it now.

The bartender set a whisky and diet soda in front of her and, like she had that night, she finished it, barely taking a breath before putting it down. Andy watched without judgement and downed her own drink, then ordered another round.

They stayed at the bar, listening partially to the band but mostly talking about frivolous things – the latest celebrity gossip, fashion mishaps, nail polish. A few drinks in, Hazel was feeling calm, the grip of anxiety looser than it had been for a while. For a few minutes she felt normal, like herself before the accident. Then Andy mentioned what almost no one mentioned in Hazel’s presence.

“I know this has been tough on you. God, I can’t even imagine. But I want you to know you’re not alone in your grief. We all miss Alice. She was one of my closest friends. Every day I miss her bright shining face. And her laugh. She had a great laugh.”

Hazel tried to stop herself, to keep from repeating what she had said that night. Right now, she wanted to tell Andy thank you and share stories about their friend. Instead, the words spilled from her mouth, an unaltered rendition of the original event.

“You’re right. You can’t imagine. And don’t bother trying. Coming here was a mistake. I have to go.” She finished her drink, then grabbed her jacket and left. Andy called after her but the words were not discernible through the music.

As Hazel stepped out into the brisk night air, she stumbled. She was drunk. The kind of drunk that caused a brain-searing headache and stomach-emptying nausea the next morning. Her phone chimed and buzzed twice. When she opened it, the text box read:

**You regret drinking too much and overreacting.**

**You:**

- a) Go back inside and apologize**
- b) Go for a walk**
- c) Turn back**
- d) Start over**

Too drunk to be rational, and for no particular reason why, she selected option C.

The ground lurched and everything in her peripheral vision blurred. When she looked up from her phone she was standing in her entryway, clear headed and somehow sober. Matt was in the bedroom calling to her.

“Honey, do you think I should wear the blue tie? Will it clash with your dress?”

Hazel looked down. The skirt of her teal dress floated just above her ankles showing off the gold straps of her favorite heels. Her finger and toenails were painted red, deep almost blood colored shade of red. She turned to the mirror hung next to the door and stared at her reflection.

Her dark, wild curly hair was pulled back, only slightly tamed by bobby pins. Matt bought her flowers and she had fastened one of the them just behind her left ear. She remembered what night this was.

“You look amazing sweetie,” Matt said as he appeared next to her and kissed her cheek. “Are you ready to go?”

“Matt, I’m not sure this is a good idea,” she said with the exact same inflections and notes of worry she had that night. She tried to tell the truth, *Absolutely not, I can’t. Too much, it’ll be too much. Too much noise, too many people.* But what came out followed the original lines of the script.

“I don’t think I can go out.” She could not handle crowds since the accident. She had a hard time being in a car. She did not drive anymore and she never got in the car at night. She had not been back to work either. She was most calm when she was on the couch binge watching shows or playing games on her phone.

“We need to celebrate! You just got the casts off your arm and your physical therapist says your leg is getting stronger,” he said, the enthusiasm sounding forced. “That, and you need to get out of the house and move more.”

Despite the mounting anxiety, the fist in her chest tight as ever, she yielded. To please him. To stop his pleading. Remembering the subsequent events, her mind began to build and repeat the images, not of the car accident, but of this night. *I can’t. I can’t. I can’t.* Flashes of dancing clumsily. Of someone running into her because she missed a step. Of her screaming “Back off!” Of her collapsing to the floor unable to breathe.

Her phone was still in her hand. It chimed and vibrated twice. Relief flooded through her as she viewed the screen.

**Wishing to avoid this night, you:**

- a) **Get in the car anyway**
- b) **Go sit on the couch**
- c) **Turn back**
- d) **Start over**

Her finger hovered over “d) Start over” but she didn’t know what “start over” meant.

*Start over where? To what?* She selected option C.

The overhead lights in the room were off, and the one behind the bed emitted a soft warm glow. The monitor hooked up to Hazel was silent, the sound of her pulse playing at the nurses’ station rather than in the room. The steady peaks and valleys of the electrocardiogram’s readings were mesmerizing. She was unsure how long she had been fixated on the screen, monitoring her own vital signs – pulse, respiration, ECG, oxygenation levels – experimenting with taking deep breaths and watching her oxygenation level increase, her heart rate decrease slightly; holding her breath and watching how oxygen levels decreased and her heart rate increased. It was all so much more manageable than thinking about what else was going on in her body. The accident left her with numerous torn ligaments and muscles, and seventeen fractures in total. Five in the left wrist, one each in the right radius and ulna, one in the right humerus, four in her ribs on the left side, three in her pelvis and one in her left femur. Everything except her ribs and forearm required surgical repair.

She recovered quickly from the surgeries, and the pain of breathing with broken ribs was subsiding. The bruising in her lungs and internal organs was almost gone, but she was back in the hospital. During the course of healing she developed a severe infection in her thigh.

Hazel remembered this night vividly. Matt sat in the chair next to her bed, pretending to read and struggling not to fill the silence with meaningless conversation. Earlier, frustrated and short-tempered, she yelled at him, “Stop talking! I can’t take it. Either shut up or get out.” The pain in her leg was worse than anything else in her body. She could feel it throbbing with her pulse. However great the pain, it was more manageable than the fear. Tomorrow she was going into surgery to remove the hardware in her leg, which had allowed her femur to heal properly, but now was the nidus of infection. There was a chance the leg was unsalvageable. There was high chance they would have to graft bone and a small chance they would have to amputate her leg. So, she focused on her monitor and tried to block out everything else, including Matt.

Her phone buzzed on the bedside table. “Do you want me to get that?” Matt asked.

“Just hand it to me.” She looked down at the phone. Originally it had been a text from her mom, but this time it was the game.

**You are filled with pain, in your soul and in your body. You:**

- a) Try to sleep**
- b) Talk to Matt**
- c) Turn back**
- d) Start over**

Maybe if she selected “d) Start Over” it would take her back before the accident. Or maybe selecting “turn back” would give her options to make a different decision. She could imagine what they would be: offer to drive the car, tell Alice to take the next exit and get a hotel for the night, turn back.

Her finger hovered over D, but at the last moment she chose the familiar over the unknown and selected C.

Tom Petty was playing in the car and she was singing along with Alice. “She’s a good girl, loves her momma, loves Jesus and America, too.”

Hazel tried to stop singing to tell Alice to pull over, to tell her there was a car speeding toward them, that the guy was texting and that he wasn’t paying attention. But what came out were the next words of the song. “She’s a good girl, crazy ‘bout Elvis.” She tried to reach out and grab the wheel, but her hands stayed locked around her phone. This time she saw the car off in the distance. It wasn’t swerving. It was in its lane. For a moment Hazel held the hope that her past was changing, that the driver wasn’t distracted by his phone, that the cars would pass each other by and no one but Hazel would hold a memory of the worst that could happen.

Then the other car drifted into the opposite shoulder. A few seconds later he would over correct and jump the median, ramming into Alice and Hazel. It would crush the driver-side door and flip the car. A defective airbag would fail to deploy. Alice would hit her head on the steering wheel and her knees would jam up into her chest. Hazel would watch helplessly as Alice bled out internally and died within minutes. She would scream Alice’s name continually until her throat was raw.

In the few precious seconds before the approaching car crossed the median, Hazel continued to sing but Alice broke script. She took her hands off the wheel and turned to Hazel.

“Hazel, I love you. Stop falling and be free.”

The world faded until all she saw was Alice’s beautiful face. When the cars collided, the two friends flew free from the wreckage. Hazel could not hear the screeching and grinding of metal or smell the burning rubber. She watched as her friend drifted up and faded until she could no longer distinguish Alice from the stars, and then she was gone.



Hazel landed softly on the ground a hundred yards from the crash. She watched safely from this distance as the emergency vehicles arrived and the firefighters worked to put out the fire and to free the occupants of the vehicles. She watched in wonder as they quickly and methodically took off the passenger side door, removed her from the car and placed her on a backboard. When the phone chimed and vibrated, she was startled to still have it in her hands. All that was on the screen was:

**Start Over**