

I Wish

Isabel

Have you ever felt like one decision completely changed the course of your life? One fleeting moment where you decided to do something, or in my case, *not* do something, and it spiralled into the mother of all fuck-ups?

I grip Josh's hand so tight that my fingertips begin to whiten as I will him to open his eyes. I wish for the millionth time that I could turn back the clock - I would tell Mum or the police or *someone* that Josh's dad is a violent maniac. *Why hadn't I said something?*

As the tears stream down my cheeks and splash onto Josh's hospital bedding, I fight the urge to vomit. The shame and the guilt and sheer repulsion of how my actions have caused this is unbearable. The steady beeping of Josh's heart rate is the only comfort in this sterile box. He hasn't given up. Not yet. But he hasn't regained consciousness either. I can see the pity in the doctors' eyes every time they come around and have nothing new to report.

When the doctors had listed off Josh's injuries, it was as if my lungs were shrinking with their every word. Squeezing tighter and tighter until it was impossibly hard to breathe. Amongst fractured cheek bones, cracked ribs, internal bleeding and hideous bruising, his most serious injury was the stab wound. The knife had slipped between his ribs on his left side and pierced his spleen, resulting in a three-centimetre laceration. I shake my head hard, willing the bloody scenes embedded in my brain to disappear.

Three centimetres didn't sound like much of a wound, right? Wrong. I had never seen so much blood. I remember sprinting to his front door, my hair whipping around my face as I chased after Mum and Dad. The door was quivering in the breeze, only a slither of the horror behind it peeking out. Just a hint of red splashed on the floor.

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Dad got there first and he slammed his palm into the door, forcing it backwards. It's funny the tiny details that stick in your brain. The insignificant moments that become magnified; the sound of Dad's hand whacking the door still echoes around my brain. It was like someone had snapped the top of one of those black and white clapboards, the kind they use when filming a movie to signify the beginning of a scene. *Action!* But this was no movie. It was far worse.

The door wouldn't open fully. It was stuck against something so Dad had to press his back against the door frame, scuttling through the gap. It turns out that the something the door was stuck against, was Josh's prone body.

"Sammy! Do NOT let Izzy come in here!" I don't think I've ever heard Dad sound so forceful but so terrified at the same time. Mum and I were only seconds behind him so it was too late to heed his warning. It's incredibly selfish and dishonourable, but I wish with a ferocity that I hadn't gone through that door. I squeeze my eyes tight shut, releasing Josh's hand to massage my temples. The circular rubbing of my fingers becomes harsher, my nails digging into the flesh of my forehead as if I can claw the memory right out of my skull.

There's a flash of Josh's youngest brother, Georgie, huddled next to him; his arm thrown over Josh's abdomen and his face buried into the side of Josh's chest. He's crying softly as the puddle of blood beneath them both creeps across the kitchen floor.

"Izzy?" Mum's voice brings me out of reverie, the nightmarish flashbacks fading into the background. But they never really leave. They are always there, hovering. Taunting me.

"Yeah?" I look up and see Mum waiting in the doorway. Georgie stands next to her, clinging to her hand. I smile at him and he smiles back, but his eyes are haunted, just as I'm sure mine are.

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“The doctors want to come in and do some more tests on Ryan.” She gives me a weak smile, holding her free hand out to me. “Come on, let’s go get some lunch. You haven’t eaten all day and I promised Georgie ice cream.” She ruffles his hair as I hesitate, twisting a little to look behind me. The curtain is drawn but I know Ryan is there. He and Josh are both in the same private room in the children’s ward of Gilleford Hospital, up on the first floor. And if I thought Josh’s injuries were terrifying, Ryan’s were unfathomable.

“I wish they’d stop pulling that damn curtain across all the time,” Dad mutters as he comes up behind Mum. Every morning when I arrive at Josh and Ryan’s room, the curtain is always drawn, blocking Ryan from view. I thought it was Mum at first, or maybe one of the nurses, but everyone insists they aren’t the ones hiding Josh’s other brother away. I don’t know who it is, but I am damn grateful. Every morning I hold my breath, waiting to see if today will be the day that the curtain is open when I get there. I can’t help but sigh in relief every time I see that pale green curtain. It dances softly in the breeze from the open window, letting me know that it’s OK to come in.

“Izzy, come on,” Mum urges as Dad slips into the room. I jump up with sudden enthusiasm, eager to get out before Dad flings my shield aside. He insists that we need to get used to seeing Ryan like this. He has a long road to recovery ahead of him and we need to get used to what he looks like. It needs to become normal, so we don’t react when we see him anymore. We don’t flinch, or wince, or cry. He doesn’t want us to upset Ryan when he wakes up. He’s completely right, but that doesn’t mean it’s easy to do. One day I’ll force myself to throw open the curtain and go and sit by Ryan’s bed and talk to him, just like Dad does. But not today.

As I leave the room, three doctors hurry in after me, clipboards in hand. Dad is always present when they want to run tests on Ryan. Sometimes he even takes notes. He fires question

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after question at them. But the doctors don't know how to answer him. They don't understand themselves. They don't understand how he's still alive.

Mum tugs me down the corridor, her fingers still laced with mine. Georgie and I pad along next to her, letting her lead the way to the cafeteria.

"Go grab us a table and I'll bring the food over." Mum nods towards the seating area, nudging Georgie towards me. I let him pick a table by the window. The chairs screech against the floor as we pull them out and sit opposite each other. We both look out the window, watching the rain trickle against the glass.

"When will Josh and Ryan wake up?" I flick my eyes over to Georgie, but he continues to gaze out the window.

"I don't know," I sigh, wishing I had a better answer for him. A raindrop splashes at the top of the glass, merging with another drop as it begins to descend. Then that drop sucks in another, and another, until the fat drop rolls to the bottom of the windowsill, disappearing.

"But they will wake up, right?" He looks at me now, his eyes shining with hope. My response catches in my throat and I concentrate on not letting my eyes fill with tears. I have to keep it together in front of him.

"I really, *really* hope so," I offer lamely. His shoulders droop, his chin lowering to his chest as he picks at the edge of the table. His thumb rubs at some dirt on the surface.

"I don't want to be an only child. I miss my brothers," he whispers, not looking up.

"I hope you're hungry!" Mum slides a tray of food across the table, beaming at us with a smile that's too forced. She starts to distribute the food and I reach across to snatch a napkin. I turn around, pretending to look at something behind me as I dab away the tears rolling down my face.

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Joshua

A guy in blue scrubs hurries past, twisting his body to avoid colliding with the people he passes. There's a nurse sitting behind the desk in front of me, peering at her computer screen through round glasses. A woman in a white lab coat leans over her shoulder, pointing at the screen whilst muttering. The nurse nods at whatever she says. A young guy holding a mop and bucket appears from around the corner. He has a yellow wet floor sign wedged under one of his arms. He sets the bucket down and grabs the sign, flipping it open and resting it on the floor. He dunks the mop in the bucket and proceeds to swish the mop back and forth. Back and forth. I stand in the middle of the corridor, watching.

People continue to buzz around me, busy worker bees, each carrying out essential tasks. Someone knocks into the wet floor sign and it smacks to the floor. The noise snaps me out of my trance and I turn, searching. There's an open door to the right of me and I'm sure I can hear a familiar voice. I start to drift towards it when I spot a vending machine at the end of the corridor. A young boy stands in front of it, staring. He looks familiar, so I change direction and shuffle towards him.

"Ryan!" I break into a run as soon as I realise it's my younger brother. He turns and his whole face lights up when he sees it's me. I grab him into a fierce hug, lifting him up and spinning him round. He laughs at me.

"Put me down, you idiot!" I drop him to the floor but keep my hands on his shoulders, peering at his face. I frown. The memory of when I last saw him comes flooding back. *Why doesn't he have any bruises? Why does he look perfectly fine?* Come to think of it, I feel fine too. I straighten and pull up my t-shirt, patting myself all over. *Where is it? Where's the knife wound?* My skin is smooth and soft, untarnished. *This doesn't make any sense.* I'm about to question

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Ryan about what's going on when I see an elderly couple hobbling towards us over his shoulder. They are hunched over and the lady walks with a stick. They get closer and closer until I'm about to warn them that they're going to knock into Ryan. I open my mouth, but the sound dies as they walk right *through* him. Ryan just...faded around them as they walked through his body...as if he didn't exist...as if he were fragments of dust floating around them.

My mouth flaps in shock, like a fish gasping for air. No words will come out. The couple continue on their way and I flinch as they pass through me too. I shake my head in disbelief, turning to watch them go. I hadn't felt a thing.

"What is...are we...?" I can't seem to form a complete sentence. Ryan laughs again.

"Oh, come on, Josh. You must have figured it out by now." He rolls his eyes at me. He sounds like Ryan, he talks like Ryan, but I just saw someone walk right fucking through him as if he's a...

"Are we...dead?" I choke on the final word. Ryan smirks at me and shakes his head.

"Not yet, bro. Not yet." My brain tries to scramble for a logical explanation.

"So, we're...in between?" I'm not sure what I'm asking really.

"Yep. Not quite dead, but not quite alive. I've been walking around this place for ages wondering when you'd turn up. Took your bloody time!"

"How are you...acting so..."

"Normal?" he interrupts. "Like I said, I've been here a while. I'm used to it now." I nod as if what he's saying is making sense, but it doesn't. What the fuck is going on? There's an awkward silence as my brain tries to process what I've uncovered. I feel like I'm going to throw up. Although come to think of it, I'm not even sure that's possible right now. This is fucked up.

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“Do you want to see Izzy?” he asks after a minute or so, grinning. Just the mention of her name has my lips tugging up at the corners. I forget the strangeness around me and picture her face in my mind, her smile.

“Come on, this way.” Ryan leads me back towards the open doorway I had originally been making my way to. He’s a few steps in front and he walks in a dead straight line. I can’t help but flinch every time he walks through someone. People really can’t see him. He turns to look over his shoulder at me when he realises I’m not keeping up.

“Josh! Come on!” He rolls his eyes again and I quicken my pace as he carries on walking. I move around people, staying out of their way out of habit. Ryan pauses at the doorway, waiting for me. I step up next to him and immediately see Izzy sitting next to a bed. She’s gripping someone’s hand, staring at her fingers entwined with theirs, barely blinking. I try to ignore the pang of jealousy that courses through me. How I wish I could hold her hand right now. Her hair is piled up high on her head into a bun, loose strands hanging down around her ears. Her face is bare of makeup and she has dark circles under her eyes, her cheeks red and blotchy. She’s hunched over in the chair, leaning as close to the bed as possible. The door frame is blocking the rest of my view, so I step into the room.

A combination of joy and relief hits me as I see little Georgie sitting cross-legged on the end of the bed. He has his back to Izzy and there is a pad of white paper resting across his legs. Coloured pens lie next to him, twisted up in the sheets. His tongue pokes out as he continues to colour in some kind of animal that he’s drawn.

“What are you drawing, Georgie?” Izzy’s mum, Sammy, is sitting in a high-backed armchair. It’s light blue and made of a stiff, plastic-looking fabric. It looks uncomfortable as hell. She leans over to peer at Georgie’s drawing. She looks tired. Usually so neat and stylish, her clothes are rumpled and loose.

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“A dog. When Ryan and Josh wake up, I want us to get a dog. I love dogs.” Georgie carries on colouring, not looking up. Sammy smiles but it’s more of a grimace, her lips squashing into a thin line as she closes her eyes.

“A dog loves you no matter what. I think they need that.” Tears spring to my eyes as I see the pain that flickers across both Izzy and Sammy’s faces. Neither of them responds to Georgie.

I take another step forward and my heart plummets through my chest as I see who is lying in the bed. It’s *me*. For a second, I’m frozen. Part of me wants to hurl myself out the room and never look back. Another part of me dares to get a closer look. Eventually, I take a step forward. I can’t be sure, but I swear the walls begin to close in on me.

I peer at my body, still keeping my distance. My face looks like an artist has used me as their canvas. They’ve mixed shades of blue and green, and purple and yellow, and delicately smudged their watercolour paint across my skin. The blotches of colour interlock with each other, barely any of my natural skin showing. The purple gets darker and darker closer to my eyes, until it’s almost black. My hair has grown long and unkempt, my fringe hanging down low over my eyes.

I take two more steps until I’ve passed behind Izzy and I’m standing next to my shoulders. My head starts pounding and the edges of my vision blur. The walls definitely seem closer now. I wince, a sudden pain in my side. I lift my t-shirt and see a faint red line that wasn’t there before. My skin looks brighter, more solid. I skim my thumb across it and I can feel the indentation. What the fuck?

I stumble backwards, my head feeling clearer with every step. I grasp the door frame, clinging to it. I’m breathing heavy and sweat drips down my forehead. I wipe it away with the back of my hand. I hold my hand up, looking at the sweat glistening there. My hand looks

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almost translucent. Beneath the slick of sweat and my skin, I can see a faint and hazy Izzy still holding my hand. I turn my hand, watching the room through it as I rotate my wrist. I look down and check my side again; the red line is gone. My skin is back to being unspoiled. I tremble as I look around for Ryan, but he's gone. He's not here anymore.