

I was having a nice dream in history class. My best friend, Simon, and I were out canoeing on the lake in the middle of the summer, the bright blue of the sky and water in stark contrast to the green of the trees. We paddle along, silently, peacefully, with nothing to fear in the world. But that stupid bell startles me awake, alerting me to the progression of class into lunch. Sometimes it feels like I can only manage to get decent sleep during class. Strange, right? But everything in my head gets louder when I am alone. To be fair, it is not very quiet around crowds of people either. I guess it is never quiet. Maybe ignoring the noise gets easier when there are other things going on, too.

Now that class is over, I haul my bag up over one shoulder to go find Simon, and head toward the upper hallway where we eat together, just the two of us. It's nicer that way, people tend to leave us alone. Nobody is there calling me crazy, or threatening to lock me up because they think it's funny that I ran out of the classroom in a panic multiple times last year after the voices had me convinced something bad would happen if I stayed. Nobody is there, picking on Simon, shoving him against the wall for being different from the rest of us.

I met Simon right before everything started happening with me. A little over a year ago. I never really wanted to be around the rest of the crowd, and they didn't really seem to want me around either. Simon, well... I don't think outsider is enough of a word to describe him. Simon is autistic, meaning the way he sees the world is so different from the rest of us, and he has a really hard time functioning socially. Except with me, that is. I don't know why we were so drawn to each other as soon as we met. Maybe he sensed there was something wrong with me, too. But whatever the reason, I don't think you could find a better pair of friends anywhere in this dumb school. Even if I'm crazy, and he's in his own world and barely talks.

I peer through the hundreds of other students in the crowded hallway in an effort to find him. People swarm past me in both directions as I navigate the maze of students I have no desire to be around. I finally spot a head of golden blond hair, rising taller than the rest of the crowd.

"Hey, Simon!!"

I could see his eyes light up when he finally spotted me among the throng of students, and he waited by the side of the hallway underneath a Dante quote until I caught up to him. That face, that smile, I would do anything to bring that to him. And it often seems that the best way to do that is simply by being me. That's special, having someone in your life who's greatest joy is also having you in theirs. And I think to myself that I must be the luckiest guy in the world, to have found my person at such a young age.

When I finally reached him, we headed up to the upper hallway together, like we do each day, without a word necessary between the two of us. It's not that Simon can't speak, he just chooses to save his words for when it's really important. Like when he's explaining why mathematics is so beautiful to him, or when he really needs to get my attention about

something. But if ever he's stressed at all, which he almost always is at school, all of our communication happens in writing. Or in silence.

I'm a pretty smart guy, but Simon is pretty hard to beat. He's a straight-A student, and never seems to struggle in his work or anything. I used to be similar, but the last year or so it's been getting hard to even pass. Now, I find myself staring at the dinghy classroom walls more often than I find myself actually working. Somehow the stupid motivational posters on the walls or the cracks in the tile floor end up catching my attention more than the math problems on the page. Maybe it's the trails of ants crawling up from the cracks that I doubt actually exist. Often, it's the voices in my head that I can't shake off, and I fight to find my train of thought amid the madness. They say it's not my fault, and I believe them, but I still wish I could be like Simon. I've never been jealous, per se, that Simon was smarter than me. We all have our perks and quirks. But sometimes I wonder, why me? Why does everybody else get to maintain their status quo, while I continue this downward spiral?

I wish people understood that it's okay to be different. I wish they could understand that some people don't like to eat in the lunchroom with the crowd. That they find it more comfortable among a couple of close friends. I wish they could understand what it's like to be me. Or what it's like to be Simon. Or what it's like to be different at all! Being different is hard, and sometimes I hate it, but still nobody understands why I get so frustrated sometimes. The other kids always make fun of Simon and me. He tends to shut down then. He won't respond, pulling back further into his own world. It's my job to protect him, and myself, but doing that seems to make things worse.

I wish I could make things easier for him. He's my best friend, and seeing him happy is like looking into the face of Joy herself. The way he feels things so deeply, the way he understands every part of the world on such a personal level, I wish that could be a blessing for him. But he sees it as a curse. As much as I love him for the way that he is, it pains him so much to know that he's never going to be like everybody else. He's going to be Simon. Sweet, shy, autistic Simon.

The upper hallway is more specifically known as the science wing. It contains three classrooms, one each for physics, chemistry, and biology. Artwork covers the walls, and each day Simon and I sit ourselves on the dusty, tile floor right beneath the Raphael painting *The School of Athens*. The furniture in the hallway is constantly moving and changing according to the whims of studying high school kids, and today a large, fake potted plant and two green cushioned chairs are sitting right under the painting where we sit. So we silently move them back to where they belong, and get comfortable in our spot.

I lay my head on Simon's shoulder, his soft, golden hair up against my ear, and I wish I could sit like this with him forever. I glance down at his phone, and he's playing a puzzle game, as he often is. I love watching the gears turn in his head, as he figures out each piece of the puzzle, his brain focusing on each little detail as the rest of the painful world fades away.

“Hey freak!! Michael! Who are you hiding from now? All alone in the hallway again? Why don’t you listen to those voices in your head and kill yourself too.”

Of course they decide to show up now... This hallway had been a haven after they tracked us down in the library two weeks ago and gave Simon hell. Nobody spends much time in the upper hallway unless they have class there. Except for today, I guess. Each time these losers decide to torment us, I have to decide whether I should respond or ignore it. By the time I collect myself for a response, they’ve already walked away and I’ve missed my moment for retribution. Not like it would have made any difference. I’m just glad they left Simon alone today. Something has seemed off about him lately. I haven’t heard a word from him in days, and he doesn’t want to write out any responses either. These guys seem to get a kick out of watching Simon shut down and shut himself out from the rest of the world. So maybe they’ve left him alone because he already seems so far gone and there’s no further back for him to recede.

It’s horrible, the way they treat Simon, but there’s nothing he nor I can do about it except continue to find new places to hide and eat our lunch in peace. It doesn’t make much of a difference anyways. These idiots are still going to hunt us down, each and every day, and nothing will get them to leave us alone. That’s how this world works, isn’t it? It’s not that I can’t make friends. Well, couldn’t, I probably wouldn’t be able to now no matter how hard I tried. Back then I could probably have made friends if I wanted to. But I didn’t want to. I was perfectly content eating here with Simon every day. And I still am! I still don’t need anybody else, even if I could possibly make friends, the freak that I am. Sitting here with Simon each day, in perfect silence, is just that. Perfect. Nothing can ever change that for us.

“Hey Michael, are you okay?”

At first, upon hearing the voice, I thought it was those jerks returning to harass me some more, but it turned out to only be Mr. Johnson, the physics teacher. I manage to get out a startled “Yeah, I’m fine,” but all the while I’m completely confused by the question. Why is he asking if I’m okay? Am I noticeably that upset over a small comment made by some idiots who mean nothing? And what about Simon, why not check in on him too? I realize I need to get better at hiding my reactions. Nobody needs to waste their time checking in on me or worrying about me.

I guess people have been asking me those three stupid words a lot more in the last year, since the incident at school. I was sitting in my English class, listening to a stupid lecture on Beowulf, when I heard a voice in the distance telling me to run. A train whistle blew in the distance, but I couldn’t remember ever seeing train tracks near the high school. The voice kept getting louder, more persistent, and in the distance I could see a swarm of bats racing toward the school. I stood up from my seat then, and all of a sudden every door burst open, the room filling with bats of all shapes and sizes. I screamed and ran down the hall, locking myself in the bathroom to avoid the torrent of bats seemingly aiming directly for me. I remember screaming until it all went black. That was the first of my episodes. More came to be after, but with some adjustments to my medications, I’m pretty sure it’s all under control now. I still hear voices though. Thoughts in my head that aren’t my own, telling me to do things I shouldn’t. Like kill

myself, or run far far away so I never hurt anybody. I see bats still, too. Sitting on the light posts, telephone wires, and sometimes on the street corner. Almost like they're crows. And I wonder if anybody else can see them too. I guess I'll never know unless I ask. And I know I'm never going to ask. I'm never going to tell anyone about them either.

Lunch today wrapped up without a sound. We arranged for Simon to come over to my house tonight after school to hang out, but that's all our conversation amounted to, and that was in writing. Sometimes peace and quiet is exactly what we need in the middle of a busy school day. I understand Simon especially in these moments. Talking can sometimes become tedious and getting away from all the clamor and conversation for a least a few minutes is rather helpful in getting through those 24 hours we call a day. It's like Simon and I have become so close over the last year that we don't need to talk to know exactly what the other person is thinking. It's not awkward at all, but it isn't something most people would understand either. Sometimes I wish that lunch would never end, not so that I wouldn't have to return to those monotonous classes, but rather so I could enjoy the peace and quiet for a little longer. But nevertheless, good things always end. People have started to stream past us into their respective classrooms, so Simon and I pack up our stuff. I head further down the hallway for chemistry, and Simon heads back downstairs for history. We don't have any classes together the second half of the day, which is disappointing, but there isn't much we or anybody else can do about it.

After sleeping through my last two classes, riddled with nightmares, the bell rings and I walk outside to wait by the flagpole for Simon. He shows up a few minutes later, and we begin the three-mile walk to my house. We walk home together, no matter what the weather, for the same reason we eat together: there are fewer people around, and there is nobody else I'd rather be spending my time with. Both of my parents work, as does Simon's mom, so they can't pick us up after school, and the only other option is to ride the bus. And let me say, we tried that once and it was hell. So we elect to walk, and like lunch, the time passes in almost complete silence. But today, I look up and see those same three idiots who were giving us a hard time during lunch today.

I stop in my tracks and stick my arm out to Stop Simon as well. He was too busy staring at his untied shoelaces to notice them up ahead. Once he finally does notice, the look of fear in his eyes sends a jolt of pain through my heart. I wonder again what's been bothering him so much lately, why he looks like everything hurts him so much. I wish there was something I could do, but I can't help him. I can barely help myself. Seeing my best friend so afraid causes me to lose control of my emotions. I hand my stuff to Simon. He is so startled that he never grabs hold of it and my stuff falls to the ground. He reaches his hand out to stop me, knowing full well that this will end poorly, but I shake him off because I have made up my mind. A bat flies overhead, and I dismiss it as a hallucination until it shits onto Peter's shoulder. He panics, and I chuckle, watching. Which was a mistake. Peter sees me laughing and approaches, shoving me to the ground with his cronies laughing as if I'm the funniest thing they've seen all day. I probably am.

I already regret laughing, but it's too late now. In my fury I try to get up and punch Peter, which results in me being thrown to the ground once again, harder this time. I look around desperately, hoping that Simon hasn't gotten involved either, and he is nowhere to be found.

Good. It's safer that way. I wouldn't be able to bear it if any harm ever came his way. That's why I take the beatings: to keep him safe. Peter drives his foot into my gut for one final blow, leaving me motionless on the ground. At least these bruises won't be visible to my mother. If she found out about this, I could only imagine what her reaction would be. Maybe those jerks would leave me alone, but they would never leave Simon alone. I can't always be there to protect him, so I can't give them any excuse to hurt him.

I lie on the ground for a few seconds longer, staring at the cracked concrete sitting right up against my nose, Peter's red Converse growing smaller and smaller in the distance as he and his cronies walk away laughing to each other. I watch the ants and spiders enter and exit the cracks, some probably crawling up on my face, but I don't care. For all I know, those ants aren't real, and there's nothing crawling over me except my own shame. I don't want to move. My body aches and my soul pains for some relief from the torture that is this world.

But I get up again for Simon. I slowly rise from the concrete, gather up all my stuff that was strewn across the ground, wipe the tears from my eyes, and make the rest of the walk home alone. Simon is almost certainly already there, hiding in my backyard waiting for me to arrive. Not to my surprise, when I finally arrive, there he is behind the bushes, sobbing, with tears streaming down his face because he knows what he left me to handle. It wasn't his fault though. Not at all. If anything, it was my own fault. But I know he will blame himself no matter what. He doesn't know that I take the pain willingly, just to protect him from it. He doesn't need to know. As his best friend, I know it is my responsibility to do that for him.

We sit in the bushes together for a while, in silence. Eventually, Simon's tears stop falling, and I wipe the rest off his cheeks with my sleeve. I lead him up to my room, avoiding my mother in the process. I know she will be able to tell something was wrong. We hang out there for two hours until dinner. Simon sits silently, curled up on my bed, and I lie down next to him with my arm around him. I can feel it in his body, how much he feels the world around him. The way he curls up as small as he can, slow, deep breaths moving the entire bed along with him. I run my fingers softly down his back, placing my forehead between his shoulder blades, feeling his deep, shaky breaths. And we are at peace again, for now.

My mother calls us down to get the table ready, and I reluctantly release Simon from my arms. I carefully get up from the bed, hoping not to aggravate my now bruising ribs. I set the table for three, because my father never shows up for dinner these days, and I don't anticipate today will be any different. Simon stands off to the side, arms folded, head down staring at his shoelaces again, probably trying to process today's events. My mom starts to talk though, obviously not understanding that we are not in much of a conversational mood.

"Michael, your father isn't going to be home for dinner tonight. We only need two place settings at the table."

But Simon is here. We need three. Can't she see that? I mumble a response along those same lines, feeling my body start to get hot. I'm angry. People keep pretending Simon doesn't exist, like I'm a crazy kid insisting his best friend is here when he isn't. But he IS here. He's right here! I can see him, I can feel him! And I know my mother can too. People wouldn't give Simon so much shit if he weren't actually around. Who do you think I took a beating for today, huh? I

did it for fun? No, I did it because I love Simon!! I don't understand why everybody thinks that messing with me is such a hilarious game. My own mother! The voices in my head are right, I really am wasting everybody's time. Obviously, if my own mother won't take me seriously.

A train whistle blows in the distance.

"Michael, I'm sorry, but you know Simon isn't here. We've gone over this before. He died two weeks ago. I'm terribly sorry, but he's gone."

But at this point I can no longer hear her above the ringing in my ears, and the voice in the distance telling me to get out, as soon as I can, as fast as I can. I sprint upstairs, as suddenly a large bird comes crashing through the sliding glass door. I scream, making it to the bathroom and slamming the door shut, locking it before anything can get in. I can hear the bats outside, mocking me. Tempting me to open the door and face them and succumb to the painful death they will bring to me. But the voice in the distance tells me to stay hidden. I'm scared. Terrified even, as I hear knocking and scratching at the bathroom door. I hear my mother screaming my name, and I fear the bats, or something worse, must have gotten to her before she could escape. I scream too, rising from the floor to go rescue my mother, when suddenly everything goes black.

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I wake up shivering, in a room with white walls all around me, an IV in my arm, and scared. It takes me a minute to figure out where I am: the hospital. I start searching the room frantically for a clock, or a calendar, or at least something to tell me how long I've been in here. And for Simon. I can't imagine he wouldn't be waiting here with me the entire time. But my search only tells me I've been here for two days, based on the sign on the wall. But there is no Simon to be found.

A nurse steps into the room once she realizes I'm awake, and starts to take my vitals while asking how I'm feeling. I don't know how to answer. I feel scared, and guilty, and anxious, and still wondering whether my mother made it through okay. I ask the nurse if she knows anything about my mother, and she seems confused, but reassures me that she's waiting outside and will be in to see me shortly. The nurse wraps up taking my heart rate and blood pressure, and exits the room, allowing my mother in.

"Are you okay?" I ask.

"Me? I should be asking you the same thing. I'm perfectly alright, just worried about you, Michael."

I can tell she's been crying, the tears have left stains on her cheeks, and her eyes are puffy and red. I don't like seeing my mother like this. I worry it's my fault, that I've somehow done something wrong to make her feel like this.

"But the bats... Did they get you? I heard you scream..."

“Michael, honey, there were no bats. I screamed because I was scared for you. I couldn’t get to you, you had locked yourself in the bathroom. I had to call the fire department to get you out. And by the time they got to you, you were unconscious.”

Not real? Were the bats part of another one of my episodes? Is that why I’m here? The thoughts in my head still feel fuzzy, like they’re swimming in circles around me and it takes just the right amount of focus to snag the right ones. I wonder what sort of medications they have me on right now, as I start to feel drowsier by the second. Before falling asleep again, I ask one more question: “Simon? Can he come see me? Did I scare him away?”

“Michael... Simon’s gone. He’s been gone for over two weeks now. He wasn’t at our house the other night during your episode. He hasn’t been at our house, or anyone’s house, since he passed away. I know this is hard for you to accept, but he’s not here anymore. I’m sorry.”

I feel my eyes well up with tears, but before I can process a response, I’m asleep again. When I awake once more, my mother is sitting over me, with her hand wrapped around mine. It’s comforting, knowing she hasn’t left my side through any of this.

“Mom?”

“Yes, honey?”

“Where’s Simon? You keep saying he’s gone, that he died, but what happened?”

She sighs, and her next response seems hesitant. “I have been waiting for a good time to tell you this, because I didn’t want to set off one of your episodes if you got too upset. But, I guess it’s too late for that now. Honey, Simon took his own life when he passed away a couple of weeks ago. He... he left a note. For you, specifically.. But said not to give it to you until the time was right. He didn’t want to hurt you any more than his death already would. But I hadn’t realized until now that you wouldn’t accept that he was gone until you had proof. I hadn’t realized that you were still convinced he was around this whole time. I’m sorry, Michael.”

I take the note from her hand, and read it, not getting through the first sentence without tears streaking into the paper. By the end, I’m sobbing, unable to control my emotions. He’s gone. The boy I loved is gone. He hasn’t been around the last two weeks. I was making it all up. I had this delusion that my best friend had suddenly become way more distant, but was still around, still there for me. But he’s gone. In his letter, he says he loved me. He says he was too afraid to tell me in case it scared me off. But damn it, I loved him too. I wish I could have told him that before it was too late. Fuck, I wish I could have wrapped my arms around him and kissed him and told him that I loved him and never let him forget it. But instead I had the shit beaten out of me, for a boy who was so afraid of the world that he took his own life. It all had become too much for him. The bullying, his feelings for me, the stressful life at home after his dad left. I spent all my waking moments trying to make Simon’s life more bearable, but it wasn’t enough. I couldn’t do enough.

“Mom?”

“Yes, Michael?”

“I’m sorry...”

I apologize for everything I thought the other day about her not loving me, about her making fun of me, pretending Simon didn’t exist. I apologize for having another episode, for losing control, for scaring her. I apologize for having this illness, for being me, for having these delusions and hallucinations. I apologize for not being enough to save Simon. I apologize for everything with those two words. I’m sorry.

She doesn’t respond, but simply climbs onto my tiny hospital bed and wraps her arms around me. I miss the way life used to be, before this illness consumed me. I miss knowing that everything I was seeing was real. I miss not relying on medications to keep me sane. But most of all, I miss being happy. But I have hope that we will figure this out. I’m on some new medications, and the fact that I haven’t seen Simon at all, or any bats, is a good sign. I’m pretty sure that everything I’m seeing is the real thing. The medications are working. But I wish I could still see my best friend. I miss him. I miss Simon.