

Carlin, David

“David, can you hear me, sweetie?” A woman was shaking my arm with the lightness of white cotton.

It was difficult to open my eyes. I felt sticky and crusty gunk attached to my eyelashes and caked in the corners. My head started to feel like it wasn't part of my body. A fog spread itself thick across my mind. I didn't know where I was, but maybe this woman could tell me.

“There ya go, nice and easy. Are you thirsty?” I saw her walk out of the room through blurred vision.

I placed my hand on a metal rail. The coldness was like a grey icicle beneath my grip. I tried to prop myself up and cried out in agony when I did. It felt like someone was stabbing into my wrist, twisting the knife round and round until my veins were a stringy, tangled mess beneath the flesh. I quickly pulled my hand away and saw that both wrists were thickly bandaged in white gauze. A faint red was creeping to the cloth's surface. I gripped at the throbbing one with my other hand, waiting for the searing to stop.

The stranger woman rushed over, thrusting a tray on the table next to me. “Oh no, honey, just lay down.” She delicately placed her hands on my shoulders.

Through my pain and confusion I noticed her outfit. The white shoes and the baggy green pajama looking pants and shirt. She was a nurse. And I was in a hospital. And now that I was awake, I remembered what happened. I remembered the red, oozing liquid pouring itself out of my wrists. I felt the warmth of it dripping

down my hands as I clutched the razor, refusing to drop it. I remembered the smell of the gin and vomit slipping across the tiles of the floor before I hit the ground.

Why was I here and not dead?

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I stood at the end of her driveway, staring up at the wall of windows that seemed to be watching me. It was cold. My breath escaped my body like a dangling ghost. I approached the front door; it was covered in ivy that snaked up the sides. I lifted my hand to the rusted, brass knocker but she was already there. She was wearing a pink flowered dress that seemed suitable for a six year old—not a sixteen year old. She was ushering me in with the same smile she flashed the first time I met her.

“My parents will be home in an hour,” she said, giggling.

I followed her through the spotless kitchen. My reflection dead on the gleaming tiles as I trailed her to the bedroom.

I tried hard to avoid the stares of the ragged stuffed animals scattered around the room as my naked, scarred body lay on top of hers. The green glow of street lamps washed over her and made her look like a creature from another world.

When we were finished we lay side by side, not touching, though I could feel her warmth inching toward me. I was thinking about what I would pick up from Pat Flannigan’s on the way home for dinner. My stomach grumbled a bit thinking about their cheeseburgers.

A cold draft slipped beneath the sheets. I clenched my teeth wondering how much time I should let pass before reaching for my clothes.

She propped herself up on one elbow and looked at me with those huge green eyes like emeralds in her face. She weakly smiled, her dimples barely visible.

“I guess I should get going,” I said.

“Sure,” she replied.

I picked up my pants from the floor.

“What are you doing the rest of the night?” she asked.

“Uhm, just gonna get dinner,” I said, plainly.

“From where?” she sat up, wrapping a pink blanket around her shoulders. I continued to put my pants on and scanned the room for my shirt.

“I don't know,” I said.

I felt her eyes on the back of my head as I dressed.

“David, you can talk to me,” her voice was small but maple sweet.

“Yeah,” I walked toward the door, picking my shoes up on the way, “I'll see you later, Jessie.”

I turned the doorknob and left.



“Here ya go, David. I have some orange juice and graham crackers for you.” The nurse pulled up a chair to the side of my bed. She twisted some fixture on an IV bag hanging over my head. I saw where it attached to the crook of my elbow, right near the collection of white scars on the inside of my forearm. I started to focus on

the coldness of the liquid making its way into my veins with each slow drip. It tasted stale in my mouth.

“What day is it?” I asked her as she brought a straw to my lips.

“It’s November 22nd, sweetie, still the same day.”

I hung my head. I thought back to a few hours earlier when I let the cold, sharp blade sink into my wrists. I saw the purple roots protruding and I wanted to sever them until they were no longer connected. But I couldn't even get killing myself right.

I had let that blade sink into my arm so many times before without intending to off myself. The first time I did it was the night that woman called.

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“Hello,” I picked up my dad’s phone that had been buzzing on the kitchen counter for at least twenty minutes. I didn't know where he had gone without it but I thought it must have been an important call.

“Hello there, David.”

“Uh, hi, who is this?”

“Oh, you don't recognize me, do you? I can play along.” She laughed a cigarette laugh.

“I think you have the wrong number. You were calling my dad.”

“Oh is that right? Okay then *David Junior*,” she said it as if it wasn't true, “let’s just say you meet me at the Dream hotel in a half hour. I’d hate to come by your house and have to introduce myself to your wife.”

I hung up. I stood in the middle of the kitchen, clutching at the counter trying to breathe. I punched the marble countertop wishing it would make me forget that call. All it did was send a shooting pain up through my arm. I walked upstairs slowly. Then I went to my bathroom and took out the razor blade that I had stared at so many times without picking up, and I carved it into the soft, white flesh of my arm.

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“Ya know, David, I don't need this right now!” My father came into my hospital room, enraged. I was mid-sip from the straw that the nurse was holding to my chapped, dried lips. I started coughing and spitting, mucus and saliva hanging on the cracks in my lips.

“Mr. Carlin—“ the nurse stood up, forming a small speed bump between my father and me.

“Excuse me, I'm trying to talk to my son!” he took a step in my direction, despite the short, green-garbed woman standing in his way.

“Mr. Carlin, calm down.”

“Thanks for stopping by, dad,” I managed once I had caught my breath.

“You think this is funny, you little shit? Giving me a hard time because you want some damn attention?”

“Oh it's hilarious,” I stared him in the face for the first time in months, maybe years. His wrinkles were more pronounced than I remembered. His black, wavy hair was doused with gray. He held my gaze, his lower lip quivering.

“I’m sorry,” I said to the nurse. She was still standing between us, “I realize I never caught your name. That was rude of me, but could you show my father to the door?”

She hesitantly took a step toward him. “Mr. Carlin, David needs his rest, we’ll talk about you coming back tomorrow.”

He looked at her with an air of superiority. He snorted and turned for the already opened door. “We’ll see if that happens.” He slammed it behind him. The nurse flinched. I saw her exhale, and then she turned toward me and sat back down in the chair next to me. She looked at me like I was a wounded puppy. “I’m Leanne, by the way.”

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“Where have you been?” My mom asked him as he walked through the door at one a.m.

I was upstairs in my room, not sleeping as usual. I turned the late night radio off when I heard the door open downstairs. I had heard her down there pouring drink after drink. Bottles clinking against glass.

“Jesus, Carol, you scared me.”

“Where have you been?” She was louder this time. I wasn't sure she still cared.

“I was working late,” he responded in a matter of fact, rehearsed tone.

“That's bullshit and you know it, David.”

“Look, I am going to take a shower. Then I am going to sleep. We both know you won’t remember this in the morning anyway. Good night.”

“You’re a piece of shit, David!” she was slurring this time. She had started crying, too.

“Good night, Carol.”

I heard his footsteps walking across the wooden floorboards. I heard the shower spring to life, spurting out a heavy flow of water. In the kitchen, I heard my mother smash something glass in the sink. I heard her start crying harder. I wanted to go to her, but I didn't.

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“Who brought me here?” I asked Leanne. She was sitting next to me silently.

“A girl called for an ambulance. She wasn't there when they arrived.”

“Jessie?” I asked.

“I’m not sure who it was,” I felt her studying my face.

“It was her,” I said looking straight ahead at the white wall, “she came back for me.” I said it mostly to myself, disbelieving.

“Your girlfriend?” Leanne asked. I could tell she wasn't sure if she should pry.

I closed my eyes and breathed in through my nose. I dropped my head and limply put my hand to my face. I shut my eyes as tight as I could. “No.”

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I went to Lunar Café a few blocks away at about eleven in the morning. I ordered a blueberry muffin and two iced coffees. I sat and ate the muffin, slowly and tiredly before driving to her house.

She opened the ivy-covered door in a different variation of the same dress that she always wore. She flashed her dimpled smile, as always, only this time something seemed different about it. It was like she didn't mean it.

“Here you go,” I handed her one of the coffees.

She smiled wider, making it seem more genuine. She kissed me on the cheek. It felt weird—the forced affection. I followed her to her bedroom.

I set my coffee down on her nightstand and took off my shirt. I pulled her toward me.

“Wait,” she said.

I kept pulling her anyway.

“David, wait,” she was louder this time.

I put my hand on the back of her head and tried to kiss her.

“Stop!” she pushed away from me and stood in the center of the room.

“What?” I asked. I stared at her for longer than I usually do. Her face looked flushed.

She took a step toward me but kept her distance.

“I have to tell you something,” she fixed her eyes on the floor.

“Jessie, that isn't really why I'm here. Maybe I should just go,” I stood up.

She started to cry. “You really don't care about me at all, do you?” she looked at me with tears streaming down her doll like face.

I didn't answer. I just stared back at her.

“Fine, just go,” she said after a minute.

I reached my hand out about to put it on her shoulder, but then I pulled it back and dropped it at my side. I picked up my shirt off the ground and my coffee off the nightstand, and then I left.

“So, what happens now?” I asked Leanne as I finished my orange juice.

“Well, it is almost midnight so you should probably get some rest.”

“I’m not tired,” I said, not knowing if it was true or not.

“Well, I can talk to you for a little bit if you’d like.”

“You aren’t going to ask me why I did it or anything?” I asked, realizing she had been treating me like I was normal and we bumped into each other at a restaurant or something.

“David, you will meet with a hospital psychologist in the morning. I’m just here to make sure you are in good health and comfortable.”

I laughed a little and repeated the word “comfortable”. I didn’t mean to be obnoxious. She was nice. But I hadn’t been comfortable in a long time.

I came downstairs in the morning to see my mother lying on the couch next to a gin bottle with a finger’s worth of liquid left at the bottom.

“Mom?” I checked to see if she was awake.

She didn’t move. She stayed sprawled on her back with her mouth wide open. I shook her with my left arm, a new scar sat on the surface of skin underneath my elbow. I pulled my sleeve down to cover it.

“Mom?” I repeated again.

She sat up abruptly, a snort escaping her.

“Oh, geez, David, you scared me.”

“Sorry.”

She touched a hand to her forehead and squinted. “Where’s your dad?”

“Dunno.”

“Did he come home last night?”

I wanted to scream at her. To tell her she deserved this. Did she really not remember?

“Dunno,” I said again, hoping she was just covering it up and that she actually did remember.

“Hmm, I’ll just call him in a bit,” she said, lying back down. She was asleep again almost instantly.

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“How come only my dad came? Where’s my mom?” I asked Leanne.

“We were only able to get in touch with him a little while ago. No one answered the house phone all night,” she gave me the same sympathetic look she had been giving me since I’d been awake.

“Oh,” he was probably with that woman from the phone. Either her or one of the others. He probably took a detour here to yell at me and then go right back to his fancy hotel. He probably didn't even tell my mom. She couldn't deal with it. Neither of them wanted to deal with me.

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I stood in her driveway, holding my iced coffee, letting the cold moisture from the cup perspire into my hand. I looked up at the wall of windows that her bedroom sat behind. I couldn't see her.

I turned back around and knocked on the ivy-covered door. She didn't answer. I stood there for another minute, about to leave when she finally appeared at the door. She stared at me with red, tear stained eyes. Drips of black mascara collected underneath her lashes.

“Forget something?” she asked, sniffing.

“What did you want to tell me?” I scanned her small body. She had changed out of her dress and into sweat pants and a tank top with a unicorn on it. I stared at the unicorn, disgusted.

“Come in,” she said. Her sniffing and crying slowed down.

I walked inside and went to sit on the couch in the living room. I had never been in any room other than her bedroom before. She sat across from me in a different chair. Usually she put herself as close to me as possible, but not now.

“Uhm,” she took a tissue from a box on the table, “are you sure you’re going to care?” she asked.

“I guess I won’t know until you tell me.”

She exhaled. “I have cancer.”

I stared at her for a few silent moments. She wasn't the same pretty, blond girl with the freckly nose and sparkly forest of eyes. She was too human.

“I really do have to go,” I said. She started to cry again.

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“Can I change your bandages for you?” Leanne asked already standing up.

I didn't answer as she walked over to the counter at the far end of the room. She came over to me after collecting two different types of gauze, miniature scissors, and rubbing alcohol.

She unwound my soiled bandages slowly and carefully.

“Just so you know, you’re going to be fine,” she said to me as her pale fingers tenderly worked around the stitches on my wrists.

“Thanks,” I replied, but it wasn't true.

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“I didn't ask to know you,” I said as I closed the door to her house. I heard how hard she was crying from outside as I walked to my car. I don't know why I said it.

I slammed the steering wheel hard as I drove home. I wanted to crash my car. I wanted it to end.

I pulled into my driveway and opened the car door before I came to a full stop. I kicked the gravel, sending dust into the air and grey pebbles all around me. I went inside the dark house. I felt like my own ghost.

I walked to the kitchen and took one of my mom’s many gin bottles out of the cabinet. I chugged a quarter of it, spitting and gagging as I did. I took the rest upstairs.

I shoved everything out of my bathroom medicine cabinet, found the crusty blooded razor blade and instead of taking it to the inside of my arm, I took it to my wrists for what I hoped would be the last time. I dug in hard, blood spilling down my

hands. I gasped and dropped to my knees. I grabbed for the gin bottle, smearing red against the thick glass. I wobbled as I continued to connect the razor to the insides of my skin. The bathroom swayed, or maybe it was me that was swaying. Blood, gin, my face against tiles. I threw up. Everything turned from red to black. And I thought it was over.

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“Should I let you go to sleep now?” Leanne asked after she finished cleaning and bandaging my wrists.

“Sure,” I said, “Do I need this thing still?” I pointed to the IV bag above my head. My wrists hurt enough without having the annoying discomfort of a needle in my arm.

“I’ll slow the drip but you need it until it runs out,” she walked behind me and twisted a fixture on the tube.

She left the room and I was alone. I laid silently for what felt like too long before eventually, sleep came.

I heard a crying girl. I saw a veiny, purple face and a baldhead. Green eyes, shone in a powdered face. Razors dug into wrists. Gin bottles smashed on the floor. Smashed in the sink. His hand caressed her back. The wedding ring didn’t belong on his finger. He screamed that he hated me. I tossed and turned. I wanted the razor to stop hurting my wrist. I wanted her hair to grow back. I wanted him to love me. To love her. I wanted the blood to keep coming from my wrists until there was none left.

Then, I woke up and I was still alone.

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The first time I met her was a Saturday morning. I went to get coffee at the Lunar Café. A small girl with wavy, blond hair stood in front of me in line. She turned around and looked at me with huge, green eyes, flashing a dimpled smile.

“Hi,” she said.

“Hey,” I replied with no smile.

She lingered around until I got my coffee and muffin. When I sat at a table, she sat in the chair across from me without asking.

“I’m Jessie,” she said, smiling so wide that her eyes wrinkled.

“David,” I replied, still not smiling.

I saw her glance at my arm. My short sleeves didn't cover the scars.

“What’s wrong?” she asked. I thought it might have been the first time anyone asked me that in years.

I took a sip of my coffee and stared at her eyes. I managed a weak smile, possibly the first time I smiled in months. And for just a little while, nothing was wrong.