

NOISE

I'd never heard the sound of bone breaking, but somehow I recognized it when his head hit the pavement. It felt like I stood unmoving for an eternity before I knew how to react.

The first thing I did was throw up.

The next thing I did was call for an ambulance.

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The funeral was a quiet affair on a Sunday afternoon, in a far corner of the cemetery where the surrounding greenery made it almost possible to forget we were in Queens. After a while everyone left, and I was alone with just the headstone and the freshly turned soil for company. I smelled rain on the wind. Standing looking down at the slab of rock, with its quaint words and the dates bookending Tobin's life carved with that certain neatness and finality, I knew that worrying whether I could make it back to the apartment before the storm hit was the wrong thing to worry about. But sadness was always the hardest emotion for me to find. In the face of other people's loss I could *see* their pain, I could *understand* why they were in pain, but I could never really relate.

I used to think, if something like that happened to me, I would finally get it.

I closed my eyes, tried to push my mind back to five years ago when I had found Bosco dead. I had cried then, I think, but Bosco had been *my* dog, *my* loss. I had never been under any illusion that Tobin belonged to me, and the only thing I could pull from that memory was frustration. Tobin had been so *understanding*, he didn't like dogs but he was

sad because I was sad. Despite everything, he'd always been so much better at that kind of thing than I was.

"Alex!"

I heard the call, but I didn't completely register it, or the footsteps behind me, until a hand clapped down on my shoulder. When I realized it was Cy I felt silly for flinching.

"Missed you at the wake," he said simply. He smelled like cigarettes but I was used to that by now, and if I minded at all it was only because it reminded me of exactly how long it had been since Tobin insisted I quit.

"I was there... I hung back, I didn't think Tobin's parents would appreciate me showing up." That was at least partly true, they had never particularly liked me and now I wasn't really anything to them but a reminder that their son was dead. Cy accepted the explanation. It was probably easier to swallow than *I didn't think I looked upset enough* would have been.

Looking up, I expected to see sadness but all I could read was a sort of pensiveness in his expression, and he stayed at my side in silence for a while before speaking again. "It's weird, really. I always figured Tobin was the type to die young, but not like this. It's so... unspectacular, you know? It doesn't seem right."

I wasn't sure I agreed with that, but I wasn't sure what part of it I disagreed with. I was still searching for a way to break the silence when the wind suddenly kicked up with new energy. Bundling my coat more tightly around my shoulders, I said, "I should get home before it rains," and hurried away before Cy could offer anything but a mumbled agreement.

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On the doorstep there was a basket wrapped in silvery plastic with an envelope taped to it. I didn't know what it was but I could guess, and I carried it inside. The apartment was cold and quiet, and by the time I got home the daylight wasn't much more than a faint fading glow behind the storm clouds, making everything look grey and flat. I hadn't quite beaten the rain despite my efforts, and after a two-mile walk and three flights of stairs I didn't have the energy to do more than leave my soggy coat and boots on the floor by the entrance before moving on. The clutter I had been accustomed to before felt stifling now; everything around me still felt half-his and I couldn't get comfortable in the living room (not on the couch that was his every game night, when he tried to convince me shooting games were *fun* if I'd just give them a chance), or in the bedroom (not in the bed he always sat perched on the edge of, laughing good-naturedly while I struggled to coax my hair into a style that didn't read "just woke up after sleeping under a table," as he put it). Going out on the balcony for air wasn't even an option.

Definitely not there.

Eventually, after changing into something warm and dry, I wandered into the kitchen—the only place neither of us had ever spent much time. I slumped into a chair at the little table in the corner, absently brushing away a few fast food wrappers that had never been dealt with and barely noticing when one or two drifted down to the floor. Head resting in my hands, I found myself studying the wood grain of the table absently while my mind wandered. In the other room the ticking of the clock hanging on the wall seemed louder than usual in the silence.

Eight years together and all I could think now was *this apartment seems too big for me.*

I don't remember how long I sat there, and I definitely don't remember falling asleep at the table, but I jolted awake early the next morning with my shoulders sore and a crick in my neck, and finally realized the phone was ringing. I made my way back out to the living room to answer with a simple "hello?" then an exasperated "hey, sis." I had never told Carmen what happened, and she had apparently called with the sole purpose of quizzing me about it.

As I sat there answering her questions as peaceably as possible, my gaze landed on the plastic-wrapped basket I had abandoned in the middle of the living room. "God, Alex, you *always* do this," Carmen was saying on the other end. "Something bad happens, you just shut yourself up and you don't let anyone *help*. You get so quiet, you make people *really* worry." I leaned over and peeled off the envelope. I skimmed the rain-splotched letter inside, then laughed harshly despite myself and immediately regretted doing so while on the phone. "Alex, are you *laughing* at me?"

"No, no, sorry." I turned the letter over in my hand. "The landlord sent me a gift basket and told me not to worry about the rent for a while."

"Well that's *nice*, isn't it? Why are you laughing?"

"I think she's worried I'll sue her over the broken guardrail. I *did* tell her it was a hazard... Told Tobin too, but..." Carmen didn't seem to have anything to say to that. I glanced up at the wall clock, ticking the seconds away into the silence, before saying,

“Carmen, listen, I really do appreciate you calling, I just... I don’t really want to talk about it right now, okay?”

She sighed into the receiver on her end. “Fine, but you *have* friends and family that understand what you’re going through, you don’t have to deal with this on your own.” I thanked her for the advice and let her go.

I took two days off from work with the intention of packing away Tobin’s belongings. After a day and a half I didn’t feel like I’d gotten anything done and couldn’t honestly say what I had spent all my time doing. Boxes were stacking up around the apartment, and as soon as I filled them I would forget what was in them. Their presence made me uncomfortable, they were full of Tobin’s life.

Countless little pieces of Tobin.

The silence was settling too heavily over everything, so it startled me when the doorbell rang. I had been looking through CDs, trying to remember if any of them were actually mine or if I had just listened to whatever Tobin wanted. I was grateful for the distraction, although when I opened the door to a pair of anxiously sympathetic smiles, there was a long moment where I couldn’t remember who they were.

“Heeeyyy, Alex, good to see ya!” *The bubbly redhead is Lisa*, I told myself. Normally she would have made a joke about starting to wonder if I was still alive, I thought she must be editing herself under the circumstances.

“What are you up to?” her boyfriend asked, leaning in to peer into the apartment around me. *That one is... Jackson, right?* I glanced over my shoulder to follow his gaze,

resisting the urge to tell him that I was ‘up to’ dealing with an apartment full of a dead man’s belongings.

I settled on “Trying to pack up Tobin’s things.” I wished I sounded sad, not just tired.

“Well we were just in the neighborhood,” Lisa smiled—I knew they had no reason to just *be* in this neighborhood—“and I thought you might need a change of scenery. No one has really seen you since... y’know...”

“Since the funeral.”

Lisa didn’t seem to want to say it out loud. She nodded, and for a second her perfect smile faltered.

“What’d you have in mind?” I asked.

“Just come out for some coffee or something, maybe?” She said, slowly regaining her original cheer. “Clear your head, get away from all these memories for a while.”

I didn’t want to go, but I didn’t want to stay in the apartment either. It wasn’t the memories that were bothering me, just the silence. So I went with Lisa and Jackson to a coffee shop where they’d heard the scones were just *perfect*, and listened to the two of them talk about their lives and occasionally forget that I was with them because I had nothing to say. Tobin had always been the one to carry conversations, especially with people like Lisa and Jackson, who would laugh at his jokes and hang on every word of the stories about his late-night adventures in the seediest parts of the city. I had a harder time caring, it was always the second or third time I had heard them.

Every now and then Lisa would pause, place her hand on mine and give me her best sad, understanding look. “I can’t even *begin* to imagine what it must have been like,” she said at one point. “But you know we’re all here for you, if you just reach out.” I nodded

solemnly, then looked down at the half-empty coffee cup in front of me because I felt like she was trying too hard and I didn't know what to say to her. Later Jackson said, "Don't blame yourself. There's nothing you could have done," and I didn't know why he was telling me that because I didn't remember saying I blamed myself for any of it. I found myself wondering, *why am I friends with these people?* But these were Tobin's friends, and if it hadn't been for him, I probably never would have met them. And if it hadn't been for his death, they probably never would have come to me.

Eventually I felt like I had to excuse myself. Listening to the two of them alternate between trying to comfort me and trying to act like nothing had changed was frustrating, and pretending that I appreciated the effort was exhausting. In the end all I could think to tell them was that I really should get back to packing before I had to start work again, and I left.

Despite what I told them, I didn't go back to the apartment right away. I thought I had started walking in a random direction until I realized how close I was to Cy's place, so I covered the remaining distance with that in mind. He didn't seem to mind the unexpected visit, and we went a few blocks down the road for dinner.

"If you don't mind my saying," he ventured, "you seem... out of sorts."

"Well what do you expect?" I asked, picking at my sandwich without much enthusiasm.

"You want to tell me about it? I don't think you've really talked about what happened that morning."

I pulled a slice of cheese out of the sandwich and ate that by itself. "It's... kind of a blur," I answered carefully. "I'd rather not think about it too hard. Everyone keeps coming to me... trying to *relate*, acting like they know what I'm *feeling*."

"You think that's wrong?" Cy leaned back, and I wondered if he really wanted to know or if he was just trying to get me to talk.

"I don't know. I can't tell if everyone's treating me differently, or I've just forgotten how to act around them."

"I think you're probably overthinking it," Cy said with a half-hearted smile. After a moment he asked, "How are you doing alone in the apartment?" I probably took too long to answer that question, or the look on my face might have been answer enough. "If you want, you could get out of there for a while," he offered. "You want to stay at my place?"

I wanted to take him up on it. I wanted to leave the apartment behind and never think about it again. All I said was "No, it's fine."

By the time I did get back to the apartment the sun had dipped below the skyline and the apartment was still dark and quiet. The CDs scattered on the floor and all the half-filled boxes just made me angry then, and I wished Tobin hadn't enjoyed spending money so much, or at least that he had bought less pointless things. A tiny flashing red light by the TV told me someone had called while I was out. I started to pick my way around the clutter to reach the answering machine before asking myself why I was making such an effort. I kicked the last stack of boxes out of the way with a sigh, and when the top box toppled over and hit the ground something inside shattered. I reached over it to the answering machine

and pressed the button. There was one short beep, then there was Jackson, a little hushed and a little irritated.

“Hey Alex, listen. I know Lisa would never say anything to you, but that little show today was pretty rude. I mean I get that you were dating Tobin a few years, but we all lost a good friend. Some of us are trying to push through it and reach out to you so the least you could do is make a little effort. I mean christ, you didn’t even show up at the funeral so-”

“I was *there*,” I sighed at the machine, kneeling down and folding my arms on top of the desk.

“...like you get the monopoly on being upset, okay? You can’t just shut yourself away and expect people to feel sorry for you.”

I deleted the message, but it didn’t matter. The words were already replaying in my head as I sank down onto the carpet.

We all lost a good friend.

The last shreds of sunlight drained out of the sky, and the apartment faded into a muddy city darkness of flickering, buzzing street lamps and occasional passing car headlights.

The least you could do is make a little effort.

I became aware of the clock on the wall above me—every tick-tock echoing around the quiet room—and I wondered why anyone would invent something that made it so easy to measure how much of your life you were wasting on one task.

You can’t just shut yourself away and expect people to feel sorry for you.

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The more of Tobin's things I packed, the less it looked like anyone had ever lived in the apartment.

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Lisa stopped by again, wanting to tell me that she had found out about Jackson calling me and she was just *appalled*, he had never handled grief well so I should cut him some slack, but really he *did* have a point and it looked like I hadn't slept or stepped outside in forever. I told her I had plans with someone that afternoon so she would leave. I couldn't understand how the wall clock was the only thing making any noise in the apartment. Tobin's parents came by to take away some of the boxes. They talked a lot but I think I could count the number of words they said to me *directly* on one hand, and when they left the apartment didn't look any different. There were still boxes everywhere and there was too much space and nothing belonged to me. I wondered why it had never occurred to me to turn the TV on or something. When the phone rang it startled me, and on the other end my boss's voice told me that he understood I was dealing with personal issues, but given my absence and lack of communication they were probably going to have to let me go, and I didn't know what he meant but I thanked him for letting me know and hung up. Then I remembered I should have gone back to work two weeks ago and I didn't know what I was doing with all my time. The apartment was too *quiet* and I just wanted people to stop coming by and stop calling I wanted to *scream* I wanted to push all of Tobin's garbage off

the balcony after him I wanted that god-forsaken clock to *stop ticking* and then a thought occurred to me, completely unbidden.

Tobin kept a gun in the top drawer of the bedroom dresser.

I don't remember getting it but I remember sitting on the living room floor with it and I remember thinking it was heavier than I expected.

It seemed like such an obvious solution. No more apartment, no more boxes, no more people taking up my time, no more *time* no more silence no more ticking wall clock the sunset was blazing red in the clouds turning the sky into a watercolor painting of the pavement three stories below

then it faded and the sky was dark and I thought *there should still be light coming in* but at some point the street lamp outside the window must have burned out because there wasn't even the buzzing anymore

and everything was just solid, impenetrable black.

The clock was ticking the seconds away into the darkness.

The barrel of the gun was cold and I wondered if the bullet would be cold too.

—

Someone was knocking on the door.

"Alex!"

It seemed like getting up to answer it would be a lot of effort.

"Come on, I know you're home."

If I waited long enough, I was sure whoever it was would leave.

“Alex you know I still have a key to this apartment, I will just come in so you better be decent.”

Cy.

I only realized my eyes had been closed when I opened them. It didn’t make much difference; the apartment was nothing but dark shapes. I hauled myself to my feet and stumbled toward the light switch, getting the overhead light on just as Cy got the front door unlocked and pushed his way in. The first thing he said to me was, “You look like shit.”

“Thanks,” I sighed, rubbing my eyes and trying to smooth down my hair, as if that would make any difference. “What are you doing here? It’s like...” I looked over my shoulder to check the time, but the hands on the wall clock told me it was 6:15, and whether that was A.M. or P.M. I was pretty sure it was wrong. I wondered how long the batteries had been dead.

“It’s 1 A.M.,” Cy offered, checking his watch.

“Jesus,” I grimaced. “God, no wonder I look like shit. What do you want?”

“Do you have any idea how worried everyone is about you?” He shut the door behind him with a dull click and leaned against it, looking the apartment over, looking me over. “No one hears from you for *days* and then when they do you’re barely half-there. I went down to the shop looking for you and they said you’d been fired because you *never* came back to work. Honestly, what the *hell*?”

I didn’t know what he wanted me to tell him. I looked around the room and considered saying I had wanted to quit anyway, or I was still trying to cope with Tobin’s death, or it was none of his business. I didn’t have time to say anything before he was pushing past me to grab my coat, saying, “Put your shoes on. You need to get out.”

“At 1 A.M.? What’s open at 1 A.M.?”

The lights inside the Taco Bell were giving me a headache and I didn’t want to look at Cy, so I just buried my head in my arms on the table and listened to him eat cheap food and talk about nothing. Eventually he said, “I think you need to get out of that apartment for a while.”

After a moment’s consideration I muttered, “I think you’re a horrible person for bringing me here.”

He just laughed. “You’re staying with me for a while. I’m not asking this time.”

I peered up at him. What I thought was *god yes please take me away from that place*. What I said was “Why?”

“Why not?” He shrugged. I didn’t have the energy to argue, so we drove back to his place. It was bigger than Tobin’s apartment, it was warm and the quiet was a different kind of quiet. Tobin had never been here, he’d never cared for Cy that much. “You can stay here as long as you want,” Cy said. “You still know your way around, right?”

I think I said something but I don’t know what. I had already collapsed onto his couch and nothing mattered anymore.

I woke to the smell of food and the sounds of cooking. I could see Cy in the kitchen, and I watched him until he noticed I was awake and smiled. I just rolled over onto my back and said, “Don’t you have to work today?”

“It’s fine,” he answered dismissively.

“No it’s not. What are you even *doing*?”

“I’m not going to leave you to waste away in that apartment alone. Let’s be honest, you’re falling apart without anyone around.”

He made it sound so obvious, like it just *made sense*. I had a sudden, overwhelming feeling that I could have told him any secret or confessed any sin in the world, and he would just accept it. The words were out of my mouth before I could think of a more breakfast-appropriate topic.

“Yesterday I almost killed myself,” I said, matter-of-factly. I ran my hands through my hair and stared up at the ceiling, bracing for a gasp, a demand for answers, for him to tell me I had so much to live for or I was a coward for wanting to take the easy way out—the kinds of reactions I thought I should expect.

“Really?” he mused, returning from the kitchen with two plates of food, sliding one across the coffee table to me before dropping into his armchair. I glanced sidelong at the plate, then at him, as he asked simply, “How?”

I held up a hand, thumb and index finger extended to mimic a gun, and pressed it against my temple, accompanying the admittedly tasteless gesture with “Did you know Tobin owned a gun?”

Cy just nodded thoughtfully. In the few long minutes of silence that settled between us, I rolled over onto my side to pick at the food that had been put before me. Scrambled eggs, sausage. Under normal circumstances I would’ve been overjoyed for someone to cook for me.

“Why?” Cy asked unexpectedly, and when I gave him a questioning glance he clarified, “What made you think that was the best choice?”

I had to consider that for a second. “I didn’t... think it was the *best* choice, it just seemed... convenient. I don’t know what to do with Tobin’s stuff, or what to do with *myself*, I don’t know if I should move to a smaller place, I don’t know what to *say* to people when they try to *talk* to me... I don’t feel like I have anything holding me here... I barely feel like I know who I *am* anymore, I thought maybe I’d just avoid all the trouble.” I took a bite of the eggs, but they were already unappetizingly cold. “Is that... incredibly selfish?”

“Maybe,” was all Cy offered. I sighed, unsure what I was expecting him to say and unsure I was satisfied with what I got. I rolled over again without eating anything else. I listened to the clink and scrape of Cy’s fork on his plate for a while before I noticed his coat draped over the back of the couch and dragged it down to me, fishing a cigarette and his lighter out of the pocket. When Cy said mildly, “I thought you’d quit,” I rolled my eyes and muttered something about it being a free country. “So what made you change your mind?”

I knew he wasn’t talking about the smoking. That was an easier answer but I didn’t respond right away, just exhaled a plume of smoke and watched it float in a lazy cloud up toward the ceiling. “I didn’t,” I said at length. “I was too scared to pull the trigger and I gave up.”

“Good.” That caught me off-guard. I sat up to regard Cy as he went on, “I’ve always thought that if you’re not afraid of death, it’s because you don’t place any real value on what you have in life.”

I wasn’t sure if I agreed with that, or at least I wasn’t sure I liked the implication. I thought back to Tobin, who had liked to live on the edge, whether that meant being an amateur daredevil or just picking fights in seedy bars when he was too many drinks in. Tobin had never seemed like the type of person who was afraid to die, and I had always

thought that seemed like something that should be exciting and admirable. Now, all of a sudden I felt retroactively pointless. I felt sick. I didn't know what to say so I just leaned back, fixed my eyes on the ceiling and tried to enjoy my first cigarette in eight years.

"So when do you want to tell me about it?"

"About what?" I grumbled, unmoving.

"Give me some credit, Alex, I'm not blind. I can see something's weighing on you and it's not just that you were there when he died. The last time we talked you said it was all a blur."

The room became too still. I didn't look back at Cy. I just held my breath, saying nothing. He hadn't asked me anything direct *yet*.

"Tobin's death wasn't an accident, was it?"

I stopped holding my breath.

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Tobin didn't come home that night, although he'd sworn he would.

I didn't see him until the next morning, when I got up and found him in the living room drinking coffee with the TV on. His fresh black eye gave me some idea of where he'd been. "Alex, g'morning," he grinned, "I missed you last night, what were you doing wasting your time here?"

I skirted around him to the kitchen. At least this time he'd actually thought to make me coffee, too. "I told you I had to work early," I said. He just laughed.

I could have recited his side of the conversation, almost word for word.

"You say that every weekend. I mean, you work at a print shop, how hard could it be?"

he said, his argument every time I chose my personal responsibilities over whatever he wanted. I stood in the kitchen doorway with my coffee, and I was about to answer but he cut me off with a dismissive wave. "Everyone else depends on me being there,' you say. You know they depend on you because you're predictable, right? You're always available." I didn't know how I was expected to respond to that. I never had. Tobin got to his feet and moved toward the sliding door to the balcony. "C'mon, it's a nice morning, at the very least come spend some time with me and let me tell you about it."

"I should probably get ready to go," I said slowly, glancing at the clock on the wall. I didn't want to have this argument again, not today.

"Oh come on Alex," he sighed, leaning back against the guardrail outside. "Just do something a little spontaneous for once in your life. You can be like half an hour late and it's not gonna kill you."

The old metal railing groaned under his weight and shifted slightly. I had told him time and again I didn't think it was safe to go out there before the landlord could get it fixed, he never listened. I was just opening my mouth to tell him again when I stopped myself.

He wanted me to be unpredictable. He wanted me to do something spontaneous for once in my life.

So I set my coffee down.

I stepped out onto the balcony.

And I pushed him as hard as I could.

The railing crumbled away like it wasn't even there. It was only three stories but it seemed like he fell forever. I'd never heard the sound of bone breaking, but somehow I recognized it when his head hit the pavement.