

HAPPY PLACE

The red crayon is yanked away as soon as my fingers touch it. I reach for the plastic tub. A guy in a gown pulls it towards him. My chair screeches on the vinyl floor. I lean over the round table.

“I need red.”

“Don’t touch,” he says. “Mine.”

My sister, Cara, watches with pursed lips. It’s been a while since the last time she visited. Disapproval radiates from her silence.

I manage a firm grip and tug.

Guy-in-the-gown’s chair clatters to the floor. “Mine!” He grabs the tub with both hands, wrestles it from my grip. Crayons scatter. “Don’t touch!” He slams his hands down. “Mine!” He bangs his head.

The staff gather; some guy they call “Tech” and the day-shift nurse.

Tech stands as backup, his arms crossed over his name badge.

The nurse holds their favorite treatment method in a small paper cup.

I grab a red crayon.

“Does your art need to be so destructive?” Cara’s eyes penetrate my outer shell, straight to the core. She doesn’t need to ask that question.

I shrug. “It’s my happy place.”

She studies my work. A sun sets behind a farmhouse with a white picket fence. We play in the yard, with our dog.

I scribble fire. Behind us, our home burns to the ground.

“Where’s our parents?” she asks.

“Don’t remember.”

“Heard you stopped taking your meds.”

A smile pulls at my lips. “So, that’s why you showed today.”

My sister motions to a folded piece of paper. “Happy birthday.”

“Oh, right. Thanks.” I act like there’s gift wrap, my fingers delicate while they unfold the paper. My smile spreads into a wide grin. “A birthday cake.”

“Couldn’t bring the real thing.” Cara’s skin wrinkles at the corners of her mouth. “You don’t like sweets anyway.”

“This is great.” I color flames on the drawn candle wicks.

“Make a wish, Alex.”

“It’s your birthday, too!”

“Together?”

“Okay.”

“One. Two... Three!”

We blow at the make-belief candles. Spit flies out with our uncontained laughter.

“Happy birthday, Sis. Sorry I don’t have a present. Didn’t think I’d see ya today.”

“What did you wish for?”

“I wish you would stay with me.”

Cara’s eyes sag. She has more wrinkles since the last time I saw her. “You need to get well, Alex. Time for you to go home.”

Shadows sweep across our birthday cake. Darkness cast by day-shift nurse. She clutches a plastic cup, filled with blue liquid.

They found my stash. No more pills for me.

“Do you see I have a visitor?”

The nurse makes a note in her paperwork. “You missed morning meds.”

I look at Guy-in-a-gown.

He’s passed out. Drool spills from his mouth. His eyes open and glossy.

“I told doc that shit ain’t right. Makes me feel weird.”

She thrusts the cup in my face.

I look at Cara.

“Take the medicine, Alex.”

I down the medication. My chin sticky from the haste of it.

“What did you wish for? I’ll have it next time.”

“Alex.” Day-shift nurse looms over me. “If you're not joining group, Dr. Gomez would like to see you.”

“I have a visitor.”

She marks her clipboard.

"Are you afraid, Alex?" Cara asks. "To tell them what happened?"

"I don't want to be alone."

Day-shift nurse clicks her pen a few times. "Let's go."

“Draw me something beautiful,” Cara says. “For our birthday. A new happy place.”

I tuck the birthday cake into my pocket and gather my artwork. When I look up to tell Cara good-bye, she's gone.

The day-shift nurse leads me past the patients gathering in a small circle. She knocks on the doc's door and hands over my charts.

"Ah, your sister was here." Dr. Gomez jots down his own notes. "Take your medication today?"

"Cara told me to."

"I see. What pictures do you have there?"

I crumble them into a ball. "I'll tell you."

END