

As the tall, awkward, dark skinned teen sat and stared out of the principal's office window, he looked up at the clear blue sky, daydreaming as he often did, clinging to the unrealistic hope that things could be different. He was an obviously handsome young man at first glance, but his facial expressions were always twisted in a combination of distrust and worry. He had a right to feel this way; his life had been a series of unfortunate events. Pain had taken his innocence and buried his happiness deep inside of an emotional shell so strong that the external illusion of indifference had become his go to reaction. Maybe if he was a little less shy and had more confidence, he pondered, he could be popular like some of the other students in his school. But then again, he knew that wasn't his life.

Among the many things he had learned, even as a young child, was how to wear his mask properly. He and his mother had moved around a lot when he was a child, and she did her best to make an honest living. She was educated, but also single, putting a damper on her spirits as well as his. Never showing much interest in men, it was apparent that she had never truly moved past the relationship she had with his father. He harbored plenty of resentment toward the absent man, but chose to bury it as best he could to function day to day. That was a part of his mask.

He knew he didn't have to worry about people asking him 'what's wrong' if he appeared to be happy. He knew nobody would mess with him if he appeared angry and hard. He knew how to be left alone. After all, who could he really trust? The world was a dangerous place.

The United States was once again at war, struggling with their economy while simultaneously trying to keep their bad boy image among the world. Abroad, they fought state

sponsored terrorism, stepping it up even more than the previous year, honoring the men and women who left their homes to go to foreign countries and fight in their war-torn societies. At home, race, ethnicity, class, and hatred of those outside of your own had divided the country, turning it into a hollow shell of anger and pain while the world continued to look to them for guidance.

It wasn't just the U.S.; the entire world had gotten worse. The climate had begun to change more drastically, increasing the need for chemically induced hormones to supply the growing hunger. Countries had begun the backward process of fending for themselves, dissolving treaties and cultivating a culture of greed while its citizens cultivated their addictions to technology. Although it was all he'd ever known, he wondered when humankind had truly lost its way? He thought back to a time before him; a time when everyone hadn't been so callous and greedy.

The principal swung the door open and rushed in with notes in hand, dropping them on his desk and flopping down into his chair.

"He must have just come from the review board meeting," he thought to himself, "It doesn't look like it went well."

The principal sat and stared at the young man for a moment. He glanced down at the paperwork and then back up at him. This hadn't been their first encounter. They had been in front of each other more than 10 times over the past year. A long sigh was followed by a look of disappointment as the principal looked away and rubbed his hands together in thought.

“Michael,” said the principal with a dissatisfied tone as he leaned in and looked down at his paperwork, “as you know, today was the day to review your ability to be retained at this school.”

“Here it comes, they’re kicking me out of school...again,” he thought, preparing himself for the worst.

“Let’s cut the crap,” said the principal sternly, “this is not your first, but your second, high school. The board knows you well.”

He thumbed through the pages of his record, reciting the various incidents like a business accountant reading from their ledger, “October, 2034, assault on a student. December, 2034, fighting. January, 2035, threatening another student. September, 2035, fighting. October, 2035, throwing a desk at a student. November, 2035, soliciting a fight from another student in front of my faculty...I could go on.”

“Mr. Marlow, can I say something...”

“Wait,” he interjected, calming his voice to a softer and more fatherly tone, “let me finish. I spoke to the board about you...about everything that’s going on. They know you’ve had a really rough time. I explained to them that most of these suspensions were a result of you being provoked by other students. I even had a few teachers testify on your behalf.”

There was a long pause. Michael wasn’t aware that any of the teachers cared enough to do anything but send him to Mr. Marlow’s office for suspension. He sunk in his chair and cut his eyes toward the floor in embarrassment.

“They’ve decided to let you stay by my sole recommendation only,” explained the principal, apprehensive in his statement as if he himself knew it was a bad idea, “but if you mess up once, just once, you’re gone. And not I, nor any of the other teachers, can help you.”

Michael looked toward the window, sinking into a daze as all teenagers do when they only pretend that they aren’t listening. Mr. Marlow knew better.

“Michael, you’re a smart student,” he continued, “Your grades are fine, no problem there. I used to take you for quiet and reserved, but your temper needs to be controlled son. Is everything ok at the home?”

These types of exploratory questions always felt intrusive. His reaction was no different than that of any other 17-year-old.

“Yeah, I’m fine,” he said. Again, he cut his eyes toward the window as he put on his mask.

“Are you sure?” replied the principal. After more than 15 years in the school system, it wasn’t hard for him to pick up on a teenager’s body language, “How’s your mother?”

“Yeah...she’s good,” he replied, submitting to him another canned response that overshadowed his true feelings.

“Listen,” he replied as he leaned in with genuine care in his ice blue eyes, “you can tell me anything. I’m here to help you.”

A long pause as Michael stared back into his eyes, reading his sincerity and contemplating the risks and benefits of his honesty. The last bell of the day buzzed as if right on time.

“Yeah,” he said, “I know.”

He stood up and slung his backpack lazily over one shoulder and walked out of the office toward the front door.

Walking through the streets of his hometown never felt so distant. He looked amongst the faces of the people whom he passed on the uneven urban sidewalk. Not one smile. It was as if everyone was in their own little world, walking past each other with their faces twisted in discontent and blind animosity. Harboring pain and resentment against each other and against themselves as if it was worth hoarding, reinforced by a society which hailed it as your own free right.

He made his way over to the local hospital, not far from where he stayed, going through his weekly routine. He hated going there. It was awful. A grim reminder daily of everything wrong in his own little world.

Approaching the security station at the front entrance, he emptied his pockets before being waved through a metal detector by the guard. Searches, pat downs, and a new system that scanned the body for weapons and explosives were commonplace in all hospitals.

Recently, more businesses and public domains had adopted the technology, using it as a precautionary measure against the rise in domestic terrorism.

Michael made his way through the scanner and held his arms out to his sides, waiting for the security guard to pat him down like a bouncer at the local nightclub. Once he was cleared, he turned left and made his way down the hallway toward the elevators. When he got there, he stopped, pressed the button, and waited.

As he stepping onto the elevator, he stood next to a tall, handsome, well-dressed man holding a briefcase. The man was dressed exquisitely sharp, looking as if he didn't have a care in the world. For a moment, Michael couldn't help but wonder how someone could ever be so happy; especially in a world of fear, confusion, and despair. "Excuse me," he wanted to say to him, "why are you so happy?". He pondered it for a moment, figuring it couldn't hurt to ask. There had to be a secret.

The doors opened on the fourth floor and the man exited the elevator with a bounce in his step. Michael sighed, missing his opportunity to inquire. Every time he entered this building, he had an underlying sadness, a staunch feeling of uncontrolled chaos that hadn't left him in almost a year. His depression blanketed him, rather, held him tight like a strait jacket of sorrow.

The doors closed and continued up to the fifth floor. When they opened, he stepped out onto the bustle of the walkway. Nurses were moving back and forth fast, wheeling by patients on gurneys and bringing blood and other fluids to hang in the rooms. Across from the

elevator was a rather large sign, a sign he hated seeing every time he disembarked the elevator. A sign indicating the floor he had arrived on: *Oncology*.

This wasn't anything new for him. He had been coming every week for months on end. Walking these same halls with the same sadness. At first the depression was debilitating, but now, after making a new mask, it had manifest in anger and coldness.

Approaching room 511, he stopped at the doorway and tucked in his shirt. She would have made him do it anyway. He took a deep breath and rounded the corner, entering the room with his best attempt at fake cheer. He knocked on the door twice.

"Hey mom," he said, smiling. He always hated this part. It was the same thing every time. It was hard to try to be lively and upbeat when your mother is dying in a hospital bed, the absolute opposite of the strong woman he always knew her to be.

Once as a child, he reminisced, he had saw her foil a purse snatching with a vicious combination. It almost tickled him. The man grabbed the purse, but she didn't let go. Next came an assault that couldn't have been executed any better with planning. Knee to the groin, headbutt to the nose, and finally a punch to the face. He had never seen anything like it. But now, she was different. The disease had changed her.

When she heard his voice, she moved her head ever so slightly, looking at him in the doorway and trying to smile. On her face was breathing mask attached to a ventilator, assisting her in the use of her lungs. She inhaled a long, wheezing breath, then lifted the mask and spoke to him slowly.

“My...son...” she got out, her eyes softening almost to the point of tears at the sight of him.

“How you doing, mom?” he asked rhetorically, knowing the answer.

She inhaled slow and deep, “I’m...only...as good...” she inhaled again, wheezing, “as...you are. How was...school?”

He debated on telling her the truth. She had always stressed school to him, among other things. It was very important to her that he did well. Her explanation; she just wanted him to know that he could. It was important life lessons like these that buried themselves deep inside of him, just waiting to be leaned on one day in times of desperation. In several ways, whether he knew it or not, she was his source of strength.

“School’s good,” he replied, shrugging his shoulders, the tone of his voice rising in dishonesty as he walked into the room and pulled the chair up next to the bed.

She laid her head back, knowing that he had lied. She regretted not being able to be more of a mother to him. To see him grow up and become the man she had always wanted him to be. Instead, her time had been cut short. It broke her heart, the debilitating pain from the disease paling in comparison to the pain of the inevitability that she wouldn’t be able to continue to mother him.

Michael sat down in the chair next to her, grabbing her hand with his. Her hand was colder than usual, and he could see her veins through her weak, brittle skin. She had lost almost fifty pounds, her body now frail with the appearance of malnutrition and her hair having

left a long time ago, with only a few tangled strands remaining on her bald head. Her breasts were gone, leaving only large scars across her chest. More than anything in the world, he hated seeing her like this.

The cancer had spread aggressively, causing her to fall ill way quicker than usual, but there were some memories that he still held dear. He remembered her hair, a full head of it; a wavy brown mixture of black and something else, something she had expressed that she was never able to identify. She was born a British citizen, moving to the U.S. in her mid-twenties. He remembered her showing him some old pictures as a young child. She was beautiful.

“Did you eat, mom?” he asked, looking at the tray of food by the bed, beginning to crust over from sitting out so long.

She inhaled a deep breath again, looking away. There was no need to respond, she thought, knowing that he had seen the tray. It was not in her character to lie.

“How...” she wheezed, “is...the new...” she coughed.

“Are you okay, mom?” asked Michael, hopping up to grab water from the tray and present it to her.

She waved it away, “I’m...fine.”

He sat the cup down, twisting his face in worry as he once again felt that familiar feeling of helplessness.

“Do...you...like...it....th-,” she coughed again, inhaling deeply as she paused, “there?”

She had been asking him the same question for months since he moved in, him always giving her a canned response of 'good' or 'it's cool'. He would have thought to tell her how he really felt, but it would change nothing. She was unable to care for him anymore, so the state had retained custody. There was no father around to take him in. No rich aunt or uncle to see to it that he's taken care of. He was state property, now living in a group home with group home boys. His life had gone downhill, and fast. Instead, he was just silent, because she had always taught him to be silent if he had nothing positive to say.

"You...hate it," she concluded easily, knowing her son and his personal body language.

"Yes."

She wheezed again, "Why?"

He had a thousand reasons, but instead, he chose just one, "I miss you."

A tear rolled down her face as she looked at him, her expression filled with sadness and loss of hope. Her own fate she had accepted, but her son's she couldn't bear watching pan out. The disease was terminal, and there was nothing she could do about it except give him as much of herself as she had to give while she could give it.

"Well..." she began, attempting to comfort him, "some...times...we..."

She coughed. Michael scrunched his eyebrows.

"We...don't like...life," she inhaled again slowly, struggling to breathe, "but...when life is...hard...you have...to find...a way...to...live...just...one more...day."

He wiped his eye, playing it off as some sort of allergy or itch. The only things on his mind now were depression and anger. Angry at his depression. Depressed at his anger. How could his entire world be crumbling like this? Why did it have to be *him* and *his* mother? Why couldn't he just wake up from this dream and come home with a healthy mom tomorrow.

"Michael," she said, inhaling again with that same wheeze, "I...love you...son."

He looked away and sniffed, trying not to cry in her face. She would never have it. She had always raised him to be resilient to negative emotions, but it became harder after seeing her decay from illness.

"Yeah...yeah I love you too, mom," he managed to get out, wiping his eye before a tear could fall.

On the television, the news ran in silence, displaying violent images of protesters clashing in fisticuffs over polarizing issues. This was commonplace in the country as of the last few years. The issue was never truly relevant, almost always lost, and at this point most people went out to rallies simply to stir up another fight and film it for social media.

The news cast switched to another story, studying the aftermath of a suicide bombing near the Mexican border. The country was numb to it, only harboring hatred and fear when the media stirred them to do so. Mostly they went on about their lives, hands glued to their phones and tablets, using public forums to post private thoughts behind a wall of anonymity.

“The...world...” his mother began, sliding the mask back over her face to take a long breath, then sliding it back off to talk, “is a...crazy...place. You...be...better than...the world. Promise...promise me.”

He tried to smile through the sadness in his eyes, “I promise, mom.”

“Hey...kiddo...” she said, forcing a smile through the pain, “I...can never...die. I...can...only...give...up.”

The next day at school was completely uneventful. It was awkward that he went a day without being stared at or messed with. He kept to himself for the most part; he had no clique or group of people who he talked or sat with. He was the quiet kid. The angry kid. The sad kid.

After school, he made his way back to the group home where he resided. It was an old, two-story colonial house, way too small for the number of children living there. Still, it was home, whether he liked it or not. When he first walked through the front door, two kids were already fighting over a missing watch phone. He sighed. There was nothing he hated more than living with the kids in this place. He usually stayed quiet and kept to himself, despite the occasional test which ended with him blackening someone’s eye or bloodying their nose. At this point the word was getting around, so when new kids arrived they were warned by the others not to mess with the quiet one. To the other kids in the group home it was simple; mess with him, get the fight you’re looking for. The staff always seemed to get it wrong. They always

complicated it by thinking he fought because he had pent up anger; by now he just did it to survive.

Today was a day unlike any other. Everyone seemed to pause and stare at him as he came through the door. He wondered if it was because of his school board hearing the day before, or maybe because they were starting to fear him. Who knows. He disregarded the thought and went into his book bag to grab his most prized possession, his 'Beats By Dre' wireless headphones. It had been a gift given to him on his birthday by his mother before she fell ill with breast cancer. The first few months were a little rough. He remembered her vividly; the hair, the smile, the smell. He often found joy in envisioning her when she was healthy.

"Michael," barked one of the staff, "the director needs to see you."

"The director," he thought, "why does he want to see me? I'm not in trouble, am I? I usually stay to myself."

As he shoved his headphones back into his book bag for safe keeping he made his way over to the director's office. The dusty hallway was always reminiscent of, what he would imagine, an inmate's last walk to the electric chair. He was a little nervous, but it had been little over 10 months, and at this point he had given up on hoping to hear that his mother's affliction had been cured and he can finally go home.

He knocked on the old wooden door.

"Come in."

The director always kept an expressionless face, as if he was shielding himself from the bad luck bestowed upon the kids who lived there. Today, however, his eyes had a faint sadness about them that he had never seen before.

“Sit down,” he said, “how was the meeting yesterday?”

“They’ve decided to keep me.”

“Wow, great. I’m really glad to hear that,” said the director with a slightly surprised demeanor, however monotone in his response.

“Listen,” he continued, “I have some really bad news.”

As the words penetrated his soul, Michael froze. From an outside appearance, you would think he wasn’t even breathing. In the back of his mind, he knew. He had been preparing himself for this moment. Inside was a hurricane of emotion, but on the outside, he never moved a muscle.

“Your mother got sick this morning,” the Director paused, looking Michael in the eyes with as much empathy as he could muster “She went into cardiac arrest. They tried everything they could but her body was so weak that she couldn’t be resuscitated. I’m sorry Michael. I am.”

There was nothing Michael could do. Nothing. He couldn’t yell, he couldn’t cry. After 10 months, there was no yelling or crying left to give. He was now alone. No father, no family, no friends, and the last little bit of hope in his heart felt like it had just been snatched from him.

“We’ve arranged for you to go to the house and collect some of her personal items,” said the Director, his lips pursed in reverence, “Maybe you should take some time with this. I’ll have Ms. Tanya take you in the morning.”

There was no response. He wasn’t sure what to say. All this preparation and it wasn’t one bit easier. The only thing he knew is that he needed to get it all out now and put his mask back on before he went back out there with the other children. They were rough kids, so they always spotted weakness and used it as an opportunity to gain something.

Michael left the director’s office in a daze. He was devastated, but unable to cry. There were no tears left. The fact that he distanced himself from everyone just made it harder. He made his way down the dingy hallway, strolling slowly as if he didn’t want to move past this moment. Once he got back into the house, he would have to seem unbothered.

He didn’t have any close friends in the home. That was truthfully his own doing, choosing not to make any friendships, convincing himself since the beginning that he wasn’t going to be there for long. Really, he didn’t want to let anyone in. He was an emotional wreck, and he couldn’t bear to speak with anyone about his situation and drum up those bad memories of his mother falling ill. Instead, he buried it inside like it didn’t exist and chose not to talk to anyone. Approaching the living room of the home, where the other boys hung out until dinner, he went over to the corner and sat down, knees in his chest, alone. He pulled his headphones from his book bag, put them over his ears, then put on his favorite tune and silenced himself from the world.

The ride to his former residence felt a lot longer than normal. He spent most of his time looking out of the window of the old van used to shuttle around the children at the orphanage. It was a dreary day, drizzling off and on, and the sky was a drab shade of gray, almost as if the atmosphere could feel the emotions he was doing so well at hiding. As they made their way through the city streets, bouncing from the potholes in the road, Ms. Tanya broke the silence.

“Honey, they need to fix these roads. They have been messed up like this for *years!*”

She was an older brown skin lady with warm, caring eyes, and a beauty that was youthful beyond her natural years. Very supportive and helpful, it was apparent that this job was more than just made for her, it was a part of her. Michael pressed a button on the control panel between them, pausing the radio with an audible beep.

“Roxy, play Two Mics,” he said, activating the voice command in the vehicle.

The car radio switched to the group’s latest hit, the weird combination of unfamiliar sounds causing Ms. Tanya to cringe at her lack of understanding. She gave a voice command to change back to her oldies station, snapping her fingers and dancing in the front seat to her favorite commercial song as the car steered itself, completing a right turn using lane control technologies and sensors for guidance. Michael sunk in the chair and folded his arms; they both knew that playing the local urban station was something he had never been able to get away with.

As they pulled up to the parking lot of the old familiar apartment complex, everything in him wanted to run. He imagined what it would be like if he could run backwards in history, to a time where he was a normal kid. A time where it was just him and his mother, laughing and being silly. He felt his eyes well and quickly wiped his face to mask his emotion. The last thing he needed was to break down

now. Ms. Tanya took control of the wheel as they turned into the parking lot, maneuvering through the parked cars until she reached a spot. She pressed a small button on the steering wheel, and the car backed into the parking spot on its own.

“Is there anyone besides myself or the other staff that can help you clear the rest of her items out of the apartment?” asked Ms. Tanya.

“My mom didn’t have any family,” he replied, “and neither do I Ms. Tanya.”

“Oh, stop it! Sure, you do, honey,” she rebutted, “you see me here don’t you?!”

Her smile was warm and sincere. A smile that could melt through the coldness in his heart like a knife through butter. He had always liked her. Even fantasized about her from time to time. If he was just a little older, he probably would have tried his luck. But it wasn’t all physical, he just admired her sincerity and kindness as a part of her amazing personality.

The landlord thumbed through the keys on his key ring until he found the master. As he swung the door open, Michael could smell the faint calming scent of his mother’s favorite candle. He walked through each room, taking in the energy and feeling a peace like he hadn’t felt in ages. As he walked into his old room, the smell changed slightly. He never remembered his room having the faint smell of feet when he resided there. Maybe that’s why his mother was always nagging him to clean up and open a window. He almost laughed at the memory of her cracking jokes about him being stinky. Flopping down onto his bed, he felt as though he would give anything to spend just one night there, reminiscing on a simpler time. Even though things weren’t the same, it reminded him of the only woman he ever loved.

Ms. Tanya stood in the doorway for a few moments, in complete understanding of the moment that he was having. “Michael,” she said in her soft voice, “we have to start cleaning.”

As they boxed up the last few items for storage, Michael took one last trip through the apartment to make sure he had retrieved all his mother's things. He walked back into her room, staring at the mattress that he would run in and jump on every morning as a child. It made him feel warm inside, as if she could walk through the front door at any moment. And suddenly, just as quick as those old familiar memories of happiness flooded back, the new memories of sorrow and loss overpowered them.

He sat down on her bed in silence, several tears rolling down his face. He couldn't hold them back anymore. He was all alone. The sun began to shine through the blinds of the window directly onto the bed where he was sitting. It comforted him instantly, as if his mother had wrapped her loving arms around him once again. He wiped the tears from his cheeks with his sleeve and scanned the room with his eyes, imagining the different items in her room and their associated memories. In the corner, he noticed a piece of carpet coming up from the wooden floor.

"Michael, I'm going to start taking these boxes out to the Salvation Army truck," Ms. Tanya shouted from the front doorway, boxes in hand.

"Okay Ms. Tanya, I'm just finishing up in here," he replied, clearing his throat to make sure he didn't sound like he had been crying, still curiously staring at the one piece of carpet bulging above the rest.

At first, he tried to push it down with his foot, but the carpet moved even more. It seemed like someone had intentionally pulled up the carpet and tried to hide it by putting it back. As he pushed his

foot down on the corner, he heard a distinct creak that he couldn't hear by walking on any other part of the floor. He knelt to the floor, pulling the carpet back slightly. Underneath were only floor boards.

"Nothing," he thought.

As he went to push the carpet back into place, he saw one of the floorboards move slightly. As his curiosity began to entice him, he wiggled the floorboard back and forth and knocked on it twice. It sounded hollow. He tried to get his fingernails underneath, but was unable to get a good grip.

"Hmm," he thought.

He stood up and walked over to the small box full of his mother's things and dug through.

"Where is it, I just had it," he mumbled to himself.

He pushed through the neatly packaged things until he found a small letter opener that his mother kept, engraved with her name: "Lisa Hearowe".

Ms. Tanya at the front door returned to the front door, startling him as she picked up another box to lug out to the truck. He slid over to the bedroom door and peeked around the corner slowly. She was walking out of the door with the box in her hand, humming the tune that had been playing on the radio during the car ride over. He quickly flew over to the corner and used the letter opener to pry open the floor boards. They came up easily enough, so he removed them and sat them on the carpet next to him.

As he looked down into the empty space, he could see a small metal box with a handle facing him. He blew into the hole, regretting it immediately as dust flew up into his face. Closing his eyes, he coughed a few times and waved away the dust. He looked into the hole, wondering what this box could have been. He reached in, and slowly pulled it up.

It had a basic latch and bared no distinctive markings of any kind. His heart pounded with curious excitement as he released the latch on the old box. As he began to open it, he heard the front door swing open again.

“Michael, where are you?” yelled Ms. Tanya, “Are you in your mother’s room?”

“Umm, yes, just one minute,” he replied as he shoved the metal box into his backpack, “I’m about to come out now.”

“Okay, well, hurry up we’re almost finished.”

“Okay, here I come.”

He frantically threw the wood pieces of the floorboard back in their place and replaced the carpet over top of it, making sure that it was tucked back in place properly. Slinging book bag over his shoulder, he picked up the last cardboard box of his mother’s things.