

A True Story

I'm only going to tell you this story once. I don't really like thinking about what happened, and I know that you won't believe me anyway. Even if you do – even if you like the sound of the cruelty, the suicide, the secrets, my part in all of it – there's no point in doing anything about it. You will hate me by the end. I dare you not to.

I was thirteen when they told me I had to move into the girl's home in the next town over so that I could get treatment. Meanwhile, my parents needed to figure out how to make room in their busy lives for a girl my dad once described as “a bad nut.” To put it more clearly: my parents weren't ready for a child who was diagnosed with ADHD and “behavioral problems” – the clinical way of saying that I was good at stealing and lying and hiding things. The last straw for my parents was when my father's watch went missing. It was a meaningful retirement present and even had a personal engraving on the back: *For Bob — Retirement is the death of the 9 to 5 grind and the beginning of heaven.* Hours of combing through the house and interrogating me never got my parents any closer to finding it. Anyway, I was ready to leave.

I remember my first impression of the Home when I arrived. It was brick, with lots of windows and was three stories tall. “Old-looking” was the only way a thirteen year old can really describe it, other than it didn't look like a good place for people to live. I learned later that it was known by the locals to be haunted before the founder of the Home renovated the building into something just as ugly. Now young people like me were haunting the place instead.

The first person I met was Judy, a young staff member who I mistakenly took for another teen. She introduced me to the program while another staff member, Jesse, searched my backpack. Jesse asked me to turn out my pockets and take off my shoes, all while Judy explained the major rules: no sharp metal or glass was allowed inside, nobody was allowed to touch me

unless I was “unsafe,” I was never allowed to touch any staff member or resident, and I could only leave the building with a staff member present or if I gained visitation privileges.

“Unsafe?” I asked when Judy paused in her speech. Jesse cut in, having gotten her fill of searching my toiletries and random pieces of clothing.

“Some girls here hurt themselves,” she said flatly, as if reciting lines in a script or providing first and last to a pharmacist.

“It’s why they’re here, to stop hurting themselves,” added Judy.

“You don’t do that, so don’t worry about it,” Jesse said. She handed my shoes back. I wondered what else they knew, and if there was some file lying around that laid out my past like a story and documented all of my secrets. Would I like it if I read it?

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While consolidating my things by the front door, I heard a thudding of footsteps above me that made me think of thunder. Voices rained down from the stairway on the other end of the hall. What sounded like fifty individuals turned out to be only six when they crashed through the heavy metal door. This is when I met Alex, the main character of this story. She was the only one not laughing like the other kids, but she had a smile on her face that made me feel as if she was the one getting other people to laugh. As the group was led away by a staff member, she abruptly paused and studied me from down the hallway.

“Nice shoes,” she called out. “How old are you?”

“I turn fifteen this summer,” I lied.

“That’s funny,” she said flatly before walking away. She is the only person who has ever thought my lies were funny.

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“Can I give you some advice?” Jesse asked as she led me to my new bedroom. I nodded. “There’s a lot of kids here. It’s really easy to get confused about what matters while you’re getting treatment. Just remember you can always talk to us, if you need help.” I found her advice to be confusing and vague, like something from a pamphlet for a mental institution centered on something blurry like emotional transformation. The title would be *Trouble in the Teen Home: Empowering the Self through Relational Boundaries*, or something like that. After a brief pause, she added: “You seem like a good kid.”

I had gotten this kind of speech before from every new school I was enrolled in after being kicked out of the last one. Emotional support is always available to the good kids, even if they are a little troubled. I could almost convince myself I could play the role of a good kid, but the fantasy usually fell apart after I was caught in a lie. Now I was in the Home, surrounded by austere fluorescent lights that were always left on, and white cement walls made to keep bad kids from being bad. Somewhere in my bags was a box of tampons with my father’s wristwatch stuffed underneath all the plastic. I wasn’t a good kid.

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I must have looked small to them, I guess. Non-threatening. That’s really what they were doing during that intake process: digesting me and my body, my physical harm potential, and my capacity for hurting myself and others. It turned out that I was the youngest in the house, and perceived by everyone to be the most vulnerable. I was skinny and short and my voice was so high-pitched it was almost cartoonish. Staff members felt comfortable letting me walk behind them.

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I heard Isabella first before I saw her. She was in her room down the hall from me, slamming her bedroom door open and close, all the while screaming at the top of her lungs. I had spent the last hour unpacking, but now I stood in the hallway, gawking at the scene as my feet quickly became chilled by the cold linoleum. Maybe I expected an evacuation of some sort, or for a police officer to burst through the locked metal doors behind me.

I saw Judy by the bedroom door and saw her mouth moving, but all I heard instead were words I was not familiar with yet, like *cunt*, *bitch*,  *fucking bitch*. There was so much venom in each word it felt like getting hit each time I heard them being spoken.

“So you going to come in or what?” A kid my age with short hair was half-leaning out of a room behind me. They led me into the common room before closing the door behind me. It partially muffled the screaming from outside.

The setting: two sofas made of wood and faux-leather, two armchairs of the same material. A wooden coffee table in the center, covered in paper and snack wrappers and water bottles. A TV against one wall, playing hip-hop music videos from the 90’s. The characters: seven kids scattered across the room, either sitting or laying on the couches and chairs or lying on the floor by the TV. Jesse stood by the doorway, TV remote in hand.

“Fucking bitch scaring everyone.” With the last word the speaker gestured towards me. She was a girl of maybe fifteen or sixteen, wearing PJs. Long braids fell down her back.

“I don’t want to hear it. You’re getting to watch TV, so watch it.”

“You guys are coming to us about community and shit, when she’s out there triggering everyone. Like I literally don’t know what the fuck to say.” At the same time as this speech, Jesse was repeating some kind of mantra or spell to drown out the voice of this girl – *mimimimi*. I realized it was her name, *Mimi*.

“Mimi, this is a chance for you to show us that you’re ready to act like a Level 3 resident and use your coping skills, let Isabella have her space and worry about yourself right now.”

I sat on the floor next to the person who had told me to come in. They had a notebook they were scribbling in and no longer seemed interested in interacting with me.

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Alex’s full name was Alexandria, but the sound of it always made her “fucking pissed off.” She was sixteen but could pass for a college student. She was a foot taller than me and if it wasn't for her dark skin and her hair texture (which she spent every day fighting with a straightening iron) she would have fit the stereotypical “Barbie” ideal. She never left her bedroom without black winged eyeliner, some version of a flannel and skinny jeans, and maybe her “black book,” which contained her spells. She knew she was the prettiest person in the room, but she was so pretty you couldn’t even feel angry at her for knowing it.

Alex didn’t talk to me on my first day at the Home, but on the first day of school she sat next to me in the education center and told me I was pretty. I gave her a compliment on her eyeliner, and she said: “thank you. But no really, you’re like, really pretty.”

She asked me about my wristwatch — which I had begun to wear everyday underneath my shirt sleeve — and she asked why I was here anyway. I said something about stealing things from my parents, and she said that everyone stole from their parents. She waited for a further explanation of my existence, and looked at me without an intent to dominate me in some way. She looked like she was ready to take care of a big secret I was about to tell her, so I told her a secret, just to see what she would say. We were inseparable after that.

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Alex could control people like a witch could control the weather, but she didn't control me. When she said "I love you" she meant it. She said it to me before and after a brief separation, when we hatched a plan, or when we were angry at our parents. She said it even after I told a lie, which she could always spot. The staff were diligent with us and often separated us to prevent problems. I didn't understand how two people who loved each other could ever cause problems.

Isabella looked for problems all the time. She was quiet but demanding, and often spoke in a baby voice when she wanted someone to take care of her. In my notebook I drew a picture of everyone in the house. On her page, I created a deserted island surrounded by a sea of eggshells. I was scared of her screaming, because I did not like screaming and loud noises, but I didn't want Alex or any other resident to know that. You told staff you were scared of something (nightmares, other residents, your abusive guardians) to get what you wanted. You told other kids you weren't scared so no one thought they could scare you.

I didn't want Alex to know I was scared because I already hated being thirteen in a house full of fifteen to seventeen year olds. I also didn't want her to stop including me in her curses, which is the game she showed me how to play in my first week. She didn't explain the rules to me, but the gist of it was simple enough: make someone else hurt, but don't get in trouble for it. Alex got in trouble a lot for this game, but the number of times she didn't get caught was impressive. It was a game she played whenever she felt like, and only she could start the game. By the end of my first week, I had stolen Isabella's diary – Alex's idea. Written in purple gel ink and large loopy letters were her secrets, and we consumed them eagerly together.

"So this is why this girl always wants to kill herself," Alex would muse.

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Alex and I usually found a moment alone during our scheduled bedtime. We were supposed to be in our rooms, but I looked up from the notebook I was writing in to see her in my doorway with a smile stretching across her face.

“Here.” She tossed me her mp3 player, House-approved and devoid of any major sharp parts.

“What the fuck?”

“All the music on there sucks anyway,” she said. She glanced down the hallway, and took a step inside my room once she was sure she wouldn’t be caught trespassing. “Trade you your watch for it.”

I had to say yes. You make sacrifices for the people you love. I gave her my wristwatch, which she had said made me look like a “thirteen year old pimp.” Watching her put it on her wrist made me feel warm inside, like we were just some dumb country teens exchanging promise rings. I wanted her to always think of me.

She admired the wristwatch on her arm like a white lady admires diamond jewelry, then she came over to the bed and kissed my lips. She said good night and left.

Thinking back on it now, I know it was another game of hers – kissing girls to see how they react, if she could get away with it, see how many she could kiss. Her “inappropriate” touching was the major reason why she needed treatment. At thirteen, I knew I would do anything for her attention, and even though I didn’t like girls, I loved her so much that I didn’t mind her kisses anyway. She knew other residents longer – residents who even shared the same interests – but I believed myself to be the only one she was kissing.

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From Alex, written on a piece of lined paper:



*I don't want to hear you say "I'm just being stupid" anymore, ok? I don't care if it's a joke, just stop. You know we can do anything, right? We can probably curse anybody in this building if we wanted to. I'm tired of hearing about how every bitch in here wants to kill themselves... maybe they should just go through with it. Then maybe we would have something new to talk about. They can't do anything. Stop saying ur stupid.*

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Alex's pride was when she made Judy cry, even though she got her privileges taken away for a week afterwards. Sometimes, late at night, and years after my time at the Home, I lie awake and try to imagine where Judy is now. Sometimes I imagine her hiking in the woods somewhere far away, and maybe she's happy. I can't imagine anything but the back of her head. I know that if Alex thinks about Judy now, she thinks about the game, and her second-biggest play of all time.

The game began in the common room. Judy was leading a community meeting. Alex entered the meeting late, a piece of paper in her hand and black streaks trailing down her cheeks: a depressed girl's face-paint. She sat next to Mimi, who couldn't help but ask about the paper. Alex thrust it at her, and I knew she had been waiting for someone to ask for it. At this interruption, Judy put down her phone on the coffee table, which she had been using to record notes and complaints from the group.

"Hey, Alex, let's keep that to ourselves. Anything that you get from session should stay private." Mimi read the paper without a second thought.

"She can read it."

"Alex, take it back. This isn't the time —" I was already peering over Mimi's shoulder, reading the beginning of a hand-written letter. Crooked lines and a handful of misspelled words

tried to tell me something about Alex's dad, who last I knew, was in prison. The letter was snatched out of Mimi's hand and we watched as Judy secured it in the fanny pack she always wore around her waist.

“Don't FUCKING take shit out of my hand.”

“Mimi, residents can't share personal information from sessions –”

“I don't fucking care who knows it, ok?” Alex stood back up, storm-like and elemental, and she used the typical script of a community meeting member about to share their therapeutic progress with the group: “Hi everyone. On the distress scale I'm at a 10 – no, sorry, a fucking 11– today because my mom and dad have just given up custody of me to the state, which I learned from my fucking therapist and a fucking letter that my mom wrote me, which she probably wrote between fucking my stepdad and doing drugs. I don't have any community suggestions, and staff can help me by giving me my fucking letter back.”

“What the fuck are you going to do with that?” Mimi asked. “It's not your fucking letter, bitch.”

Judy said something about Mimi and Alex being bumped down a level for language, which made Mimi stand up and start yelling as well. Isabella and some other kids became anxious at the fighting and began to speak or cry over each other. Judy called for help over the walkie talkie.

In the chaos, Alex and I looked at each other from across the room. She had started crying again, quietly, but she looked down at the coffee table between us. I realized what she had spotted there: a phone, left unattended and still unlocked.

Judy was backing away from Mimi, who was becoming somehow louder and louder as the staff member's voice became weaker and weaker. Some kind of attack was imminent, we just

weren't so sure who would move first. We watched as Mimi seemed to rise like the sun while Judy seemed ready to sink below the horizon, into the ground and to the center of the world.

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I wish I could say that I don't why I picked up Judy's phone. I wish I could tell you that I was thirteen at the time, so I didn't really understand that I was about to ruin a person's life. But if I am truly honest, I wanted to see if I could make an adult hurt. The stupidest part: I didn't realize how easy it was.

I picked up Judy's phone and I knew exactly what to do with it. We were kids of the current technology era who didn't have any interest in passwords, banking information, credit card numbers. I went straight to Judy's pictures app and scrolled through her recently taken photos until I found skin. Pictures of skin, bodies, naked bodies, everything. She suddenly became so human to me. I held her small virtual life in my hands, a most precious secret.

Everything after that happened without me; even if I had wanted to stop it I probably couldn't had. Another resident was looking at the phone from over my shoulder, and before long we were passing the thing around and laughing at what we saw. It wasn't me who found the most damning piece of evidence.

Other staff members were just starting to respond to Judy's call for help when someone gasped: "That's Jesse!" We couldn't conceal our sheer delight any longer: we had caught two in one. Pictures of someone else's skin flooded the screen.

"Fucking knew it," Alex said, wiping a tear away.

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I didn't realize that the Home was in a relative state of peace until it was thrown into chaos and confusion. After the community meeting, I didn't see Jesse nor Judy for the rest of my

stay. We spoke of them when we could get away with it. In our minds, they had become the lesbians who “used to work here” and probably crept out on some of the residents. Alex and I felt like Gods, even while we faced punishment with everyone else who was in the common room that day. Despite the countless hours forcibly isolated in our rooms, the loss of all privileges, and the attempts by our therapists for us to commit to a “community justice plan,” I felt triumphant. Finally, adults were at a loss for what to do, and they didn’t look at me like I was thirteen anymore. They hated me. It was exhilarating.

Alex and I created a new game to pass the time — she would walk down the hall on the way to the bathroom and slyly toss a crumpled note into my room. My door was always open for her love notes.

We were forced to eat on opposite sides of the dining room, but she and I would communicate telepathically across the room. Once, we burst out laughing at the same time, shattering the usual depressing silence. We never found out if we were laughing for the same reason. I thought that it must have been a sign: she and I were meant to be bonded together. I imagined our lives together after we escaped the home, completely in charge of ourselves and free to do or say what we wanted.

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Isabella began to have frequent tantrums after being denied the freedom to roam around the house. Within an instant, the sixteen year old began to throw things, destroy her room, and hit staff members. She would always end up restrained in her bedroom for an hour or so before she calmed down. The last time Isabella had an episode, she was restrained in the hallway by Alex’s bedroom after she realized that her diary was missing. At the sound of the screaming, I popped my head through my doorway. Even though I hated loud noises and I had only been at the Home

for a month at most, the sounds of children's pain and anguish had been turned into entertainment for me. I was the latest participant in this sick ritual: everyone else in the hallway opened their doors to watch as three male staff held onto Isabella's arms and legs to prevent sharp blows from small fists or bites with her sharp teeth.

This was the first time I had witnessed an actual restraint, and even though I knew this person and that I could easily end up in a restraint one day, it was hard for me to do anything but watch the scene with glee. Other staff members ordered us to stay in our rooms, but we had turned into a pack of hyenas. We became addicted to pain and energized by chaos. It made me feel even better to know I could make someone three years older than me cry through the simple act of stealing her diary. Our laughter traveled through the brick walls and out into the thin air outside.

"Why does this bitch have her head in my doorway?" Alex laughed, looking down at Isabella's face as her head lay in the threshold of Alex's bedroom. At the sound of Alex's laughter, Isabella screamed a set of profanity that was unmatched by any of her previous episodes. This made us laugh even louder, but it did not make Alex laugh.

At bedtime, I waited by my doorway and doodled in my journal. I waited for Alex's nightly note (I love yous, I miss yous, I want yous). She finally passed my room, but no note came. She showed the night staff member what she had in her hand – Isabella's diary, which she had hidden in her bedroom after I had stolen it. She explained that it was Isabella's, and she wanted to give it back to her and say sorry. When she returned from the bathroom, I tried to catch her eye, but she kept walking as if she didn't see me. I didn't fall asleep that night.

I had been listening to Alex's mp3 through my headphones on the highest volume the next morning, so I didn't hear the screaming. Eventually, someone told me the news — Isabella had killed herself.

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So here are the facts, handed down from one mouth to another until almost everyone was a little confused by what the "facts" were: Isabella had killed herself. The night staff member, who was supposed to check on us every 15 minutes, was fired shortly after. She had used a piece of glass to kill herself.

The story became blurred concerning the other details, such as where Isabella got the glass from and how she had killed herself. Some residents said it was from her window, others said it was from a glass bottle left outside. The most obvious place for a girl to cut herself is on her wrists, but others opted for the neck, as it was more dramatic and made a better story.

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We weren't allowed to talk about it. This was the one rule I was actually willing to follow during my stay at the Home. I started to think she was still in the house, watching us. I hated turning corners by myself, sleeping in the dark, and existing in silence. I tried to forget the words I had read in her diary, along with the inevitable images of gore that clouded my brain. I was convinced that Isabella was somehow stuck inside the walls, spread between the bricks like cement. I thought she was waiting to kill me or eat me. When I told Alex about this, she called me a "schizo."

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In community meeting the next day, we were given a stack of blank paper to write letters to a dead girl. It was supposed to be therapeutic, a way for us to gain closure after a sudden loss.

I couldn't bring myself to write any words; nothing I could say to her ghost could undo what I had or hadn't said to her while she lived. I drew a portrait of her instead, and I added her diary in her right hand. I wanted her to look serene, but her face became streaked and worn from the repeated pressure of many eraser marks. I was already forgetting what she looked like.

Alex sat next to me, and I noticed that her paper stayed blank. She played with her hair instead. When a staff member prompted her to write something – anything – to help her process her emotions, Alex said: “I don't feel any emotions about this. She wanted to die, so she died.”

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A couple days after Isabella's death, I was asked to meet to the Program Director. In my brain, Mrs. Herville was basically the principle of the Home. She doled out punishments and accolades and presided over pizza nights and field trips. She was intimidating, but I was used to her cold attitude after having to meet with her many times.

After I had entered her office and sat down on the arm chair across from her, she put something down on the glass coffee table between us. It was my father's watch, with its glass face missing. *For Bob.*

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Staff had conducted room searches to confiscate any other sharp objects we may have. They had found my father's watch back in my bedroom, tucked in my underwear drawer, the most obvious place to hide a secret. As a result of this and previous “incidents,” I was being tossed back into the pond I had been fished from, too much of a bottom-feeder to be fixed and taken care of by this aquarium.

I didn't want to go back home to the adults who were paper-cut out parents – people who were going to be spending the rest of their lives emotionally adjusting to my fake crime while

cutting my ham sandwiches into neat triangles. I didn't want to stay either, because it felt like the entire building was starting to exhale and I thought it was about to collapse on top of me. Alex avoided me. I kept her secret for the secret hope that she would want to see me when she left the Home. She would be grateful to me for not betraying her, and we would continue our lives together as we had planned. It was the one secret that did not feel good to hold.

I've collected so many secrets, I think that if I had a doctor cut open my chest they would see something like black sludge in there instead of human anatomy or blood. So I would know.

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She gave me one last note, slipped under my bedroom door the night before I left. As I picked it up, I imagined that it begged for an apology and offered a justified explanation. I wanted her to say that she loved me for what I did for her, and that she would be spending the rest of her life trying to make it up to me. At the bottom of this imaginary love note would be some way for me to contact her in the future.

The note was short. She was sad about what had happened, and she wished I had talked to her before I took my "anger out on someone else." She hoped that I was happy wherever I went next and that she cared about me. She ended our friendship with one last fall of the ax: *I really do care about you, but I don't think it's a good idea for us to keep being friends. I love you.*

I haven't heard from her since leaving the Home. It must be another unspoken agreement between us to leave our childhoods untouched and trapped in the past.