

## Homecoming

Dad sets out all the pictures we have of Charlie before he leaves for the bus station. Photos displayed on the coffee table in the den, next to our bowl of foam fruit. Our coat rack moved out of the way, so the shiny new frame on the console is immediately visible from the front door. Even in the hall bathroom, above the toilet, now hangs a family portrait I've never seen before. I'm a baby in the photo, cradled in my mom's arms, my chubby cheeks swaddled in a pink blanket. Charlie's around eleven, all elbows and knees with a front tooth missing.

I don't recognize my mom's face. Dad always says I look like her, but he hardly ever shows me pictures. I barely recognize Charlie. The last time I saw him, four years ago, his sandy hair had been buzzed. He had a full set of teeth, but his upper lip was bruised, blooming purple. He never told us who hit him.

Dad said he'd be back with Charlie by six o'clock. I wait around until then, working on an English paper in my bedroom. The quiet unsettles me. Charlie's old room is one door down from mine; I pass it as I move my things to the den. Dad's washed the faded plaid sheets and made the bed: tucked in corners, fluffed up pillows, a folded Dale Earnhardt blanket at the foot. The carpet's been freshly vacuumed, too, based on the intersecting lines that pattern the floor. On top of the dresser are rows of Matchbox cars, and on the nightstand sits an old Walkman and a pair of headphones.

I linger outside the door, which usually remains closed. I don't know why Dad decided to bring Charlie's stuff out of the attic yesterday. I don't know why he chose to rearrange everything exactly how it used to be—I don't even know how he remembers what it looked like back then. I was only five, but I'm near positive Charlie's room wasn't this neat ten years ago.

In the den, I turn the television on to a cheery sitcom, letting it play in the background as I sit down at the computer. Jenna's online, so we send a few messages back and forth. I don't tell her about Charlie coming home today. I don't think she knows that I have a brother. I don't think any of my friends do.

The episode ends. Jenna logs off to eat dinner with her family. A few minutes later, I hear keys jiggling in the lock outside.

Bitter wind drifts in as the door opens, and I pull my sweater tight. Dad walks in first, stamping the snow off his boots. He spots me in the den, tugs off his gloves, and gestures me over as Charlie steps inside.

My brother's tall, but right now he seems shorter than I remember. It could be that I've grown since we've last seen each other. His hair is still cropped close to his head, and he's dressed in nothing but a long sleeve, loose jeans, and a pair of sneakers, despite the seven inches of snow outside. He's not carrying anything with him, either. For some reason, I thought he'd be dragging a suitcase behind him, but it's not like he was away at camp.

Dad nods his head, prompting me to speak. "Hey," I say.

Charlie's shivering, arms crossed in front of his chest. His eyes are caught on the picture Dad put out by the door. This one is a standalone of Charlie from years ago, posing with a basketball in the street. When he was younger, he used to play with the kids in our neighborhood. At least, that's what Dad told me.

Charlie ignores my greeting but uncrosses his arms. His hands are shaking at his sides—I can count every bone in his white-knuckled fingers. Dad scurries off to turn up the heat, saying he'll be right back.

“Hey,” I repeat, and my brother looks up. There are no bruises on his face now, but a scar glistens, jagged through his eyebrow. I wonder who carved it, and why. “Do you want to see your room?”

He nods, following me into the den and down the hall, but not before pausing and staring at the white chat box still blinking open on the computer screen. He blinks back at it, tilting his head.

I lead him into his childhood bedroom, flicking on the light switch as I enter. The glare of the bulb bounces off the darkened window, and Charlie’s entranced by his own reflection for a while. Slowly, finally, he begins to look around, eyes roving as if he’s never been here before. Then, he starts touching things—dragging his hand across the smooth wood of the dresser, thumbing the edges of the bed’s comforter, drawing a finger through the condensation on the window glass.

Dad joins us, standing in the doorway and watching as Charlie bends over and opens the bottom drawer of his nightstand. Something in there causes him to freeze. I can make out the muscles in his back stiffening through the sheer fabric of his shirt. After a moment, he sinks into the bed, and it becomes clear that Dad and I are intruding on something.

A low sob croaks out of Charlie, the only sound I’ve heard from him so far tonight. Elbows balanced on thighs, cradling his shaved head in skeletal hands—his shoulders begin to heave. Up and down, a soft rhythm.

He’s crying.

“Emily,” Dad says, placing a hand on my arm. “I think—I think we should give him some privacy.”

I allow myself to be pulled out of the room. Dad shuts the door, and we both walk away.

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One of my earliest memories is of the arrest. It was the summer before I started kindergarten. I'd already picked out my first lunchbox, a metal one with the Care Bears on it.

Dad was at work, and Lisa, our sixteen-year-old neighbor, was babysitting. She smelled like hairspray, but only on the days her boyfriend came by. Today, she just smelled like detergent. We were sitting on the couch together, watching a movie Lisa had picked that I don't remember the name of anymore—something about dancers in love—when the pounding started at the front door.

Lisa stood up, hesitated, and told me to stay put. She walked up the three steps out of the den, checking her watch as she went. It was late in the afternoon, but it was dark inside; we'd closed the blinds to keep it cool.

Ignoring her warning, I climbed off the couch, craning my neck around the corner to see who was at the door. As soon as Lisa turned the lock, Charlie burst in. His eyes were wild, ringed with red, and some kind of mask was bunched around his neck. He was wearing black, engulfed in an oversized sweatshirt that fell past his knees. Hanging from his shoulder was what seemed like an empty trash bag. Later, I found out that the bag had a gun in it.

"Charlie?" Lisa said, her voice shrill. She went to high school with my brother. They were both supposed to enter their junior year in the fall. Instead, in October, she testified as a witness against him in court. "What the hell?"

He shoved past her. She screamed, but he was already barreling into the den, his Nikes tracking mud on the carpet. He collided with me as he turned the corner, and I stumbled backward, knocking into a potted plant.

"Fuck, Emily!" he shouted, whipping the hood back from his face. His hair was matted to his forehead with sweat. I think I must have started crying, because he lowered his voice. "Sorry,

I just—” One gloved hand reached out toward me, as if to brush the loose soil off my shoulder, but then he drew it back, hopping from foot to foot. “I have to go,” he said, racing down the hall to his bedroom.

Lisa grabbed me, tight under the arms, and hoisted me onto her hip, carrying me into the bathroom. She locked the door behind us and sat down on the toilet lid, holding me to her chest. Her watch ticked in my ear, hoop earrings tangling in my hair.

Charlie’s footsteps thudded down the hall again a minute later, and then the back door slammed, rattling the thin walls of the house. Lisa tensed. I didn’t know why she was scared, but it was scaring me. Her watch continued to tick, and before long, we heard sirens blaring down the street.

“Jesus Christ,” Lisa whispered.

The next time I saw Charlie, it was in handcuffs, behind a sheet of bulletproof glass.

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I come home from Jenna’s around nine at night, pizza grease still on my fingertips and a *Cosmopolitan* shoved in my backpack that she lent me. Dad’s slouched in front of the television, chin dropped to his chest, asleep. I tiptoe past him into the kitchen for a glass of water. As I’m running the tap, I notice movement beyond the window of the back door—a long shadow, a pinpoint glow of red. Peering through the screen, I turn on the light and illuminate Charlie, sitting in one of our cracked plastic deck chairs on the back porch.

He glances up at me when I open the door, one hand stuffed in the pocket of an orange puffer jacket, the other holding a cigarette to his lips. The porchlight filters through the smoke, creating a cloud of haze between us. I wave it away.

“What are you doing?” I ask, tugging my scarf up to my nose as a shield against the chill. “It’s cold out here.”

He shrugs. “Not too bad.”

I close the door behind me, so we don’t wake up Dad, and take the chair beside him. Our backyard is a mess of shrubs and dirt. Not even a single tree grows within the confines of our fence, which meant no tire swing for me as a kid. Everything’s covered in grey slush now, a mix of mud and rain and ice. The doghouse I used to pretend was a playhouse for my dolls is decomposing in the corner; the blue paint has long since chipped off, and the roof is sagging in the middle. As long as I’ve been alive, we’ve never owned a dog.

“Did you ever have a dog?” I ask. “Like, before I was born?”

Charlie takes a drag, and his brows knit together. “Yeah. Marco. You weren’t around for Marco?”

I shake my head. He flicks his cigarette carcass into the yard, rolling his eyes at my disapproving glare. “He was a good dog,” he says, rubbing his hands together before shoving them back in his pockets. “Beagle, or something.”

“What happened to him?”

He glances over. “What do you think? He died.”

I sigh into my scarf, and the hot air heats up my cheeks. “Dad doesn’t like dogs,” I say. Charlie nods, keeping his eyes straight ahead. “Was Marco Mom’s dog?”

“Yeah. She was all cut up after he was gone.”

I stay quiet, but I wonder if Charlie was all cut up after Mom’s death. I don’t even remember what her face looked like outside of pictures; she died before I turned two.

“You were an accident baby, you know?” he says suddenly, leaning forward to brace himself against the wind.

Dad never talks about my birth—or Mom at all, really—but it hasn’t slipped my notice how much older he is compared to the fathers of my classmates. “Seriously?”

Charlie shakes his head, and his scar catches the light, a ghostly white fission, separating one eyebrow into two sides of a chasm. “Did you think the eleven years between us was planned?”

“No. I just didn’t think about it.” My brother wasn’t around often enough to remind me of the difference in our ages. Most days, it was easy to forget that I had a brother at all. Charlie shifts in his seat, the plastic squeaking.

“I have to go to work,” he says, standing up. His parole officer helped him get a job at the 7-Eleven down the street, as the night clerk. For the past few weeks, I’ve been at school all day, and Charlie’s been at the gas station all night.

“Do you like your job?” I ask.

“No,” he says, squinting into the porchlight, blowing air through his teeth. “But it’s something.”

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That night, I can’t sleep. I’m either too hot or too cold. At around five in the morning, I give up and roll out of bed, even though I don’t have to be up for school until seven. I brush my teeth, get dressed, and decide to study for my algebra test later. My desk is positioned in front of a window that faces the street, and as the sun starts to rise, something moves between the narrow slit of my curtains. I peel them back, revealing Charlie on the sidewalk, walking home from his shift. In the grey light of dawn, among the quiet houses and leftover clumps of snow, he seems small, like a little toy soldier, eclipsed by everything else.

He pauses at the foot of our driveway, staring up at the sky. Then he looks away, a shadow falling over his face as he zips up his orange jacket and keeps walking.

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Jenna holds up one of my flannels, sticking her arms through the sleeves and examining her reflection in my vanity mirror. “I need one of these,” she says. “Where did you get it?”

“It was my dad’s,” I say, flipping through the copy of *Tiger Beat* Jenna brought over. Her mom always buys her the cool magazines. Dad only subscribes to *The Family Handyman*, even though he barely knows how to change a lightbulb.

“It’s so grunge,” Jenna says, tossing the flannel onto my head.

I pull it off, wiggling my finger through one of the holes in the collar. “I thought grunge was out.”

“That’s what makes it cool.” She flops down next to me on the bed, groaning as she glances over at the red numbers of my alarm clock. It’s noon on a Saturday, and my best friend is bored. “I want to go to the mall.”

“Ask your mom to take you later,” I say, too engrossed in an article about fashion fiascos on the red carpet.

“I want to go *now*,” she whines. “Can’t your brother drive us?”

Jenna doesn’t know much about Charlie, except that he’s related to me and is living with us again. I close the magazine, thinking about the way he walks everywhere. “I don’t think he knows how to drive,” I say, just now coming to the realization myself.

Her face scrunches, freckles swallowed up by the wrinkles of her nose. “But he’s, like, old.”

“He’s twenty-six.”

“Oh. He looks older.” She distracts herself by rummaging through my cardboard box of CDs, pretending to deliberate. I know she’ll choose Alanis Morissette—she picks her every time. “I would die if I didn’t have my license by twenty-six. Shouldn’t he have a job?”



“He does,” I say. “He works nights.”

She shrugs, and then extracts *Jagged Little Pill* from the box. I feign surprise.

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Charlie sleeps through dinner, on the couch. There hasn't been a day yet that I've seen him sleep in his own bed. Ever since he's started working, he usually passes out in the den at around nine in the morning, waking up after Dad and I have finished eating dinner. Then he eats the leftovers, smokes a cigarette or two, and heads back to work.

Tonight, it's Chinese takeout. Dad and I don't even bother getting out plates—we just eat straight from the cartons, leaning against opposite sides of the kitchen counter. After I finish my noodles, I tell him I have homework to do in my room, which is really just an excuse to go listen to music and finish reading the magazine Jenna left here. He nods, saying he needs to go pull some weeds in the backyard, which is really just an excuse to stand outside and pretend he's a busier man than he actually is.

I'm lying on my bed, a CD playing low in the background, when Charlie walks by. He shuffles past my open doorway, and then doubles back, popping his head inside. “What is this?” he asks, making a face.

I sit up, crossing my legs. “The music?”

“What is it? What are they saying?”

I glance up at the Hanson poster beside my bed; Jenna's lipstick is on Taylor's cheek. We've never been able to understand what he's singing about. “I don't know,” I say, shrugging.

Charlie steps into the room, inspecting the poster. “Is that them?” he asks, raising an eyebrow. “They're . . . children.”

“That one's my age,” I say, pointing at Jenna's lipstick mark.

He crosses his arms, in disbelief. His face remains blank as he shifts his gaze to the other posters that decorate my hot pink walls—most of them featuring various boy bands. Not a single spark of recognition flickers in his eyes. “Jesus,” he mutters, and then he looks at me. “Do you want to hear what I listened to when I was your age?”

“Obviously. Yes.”

He leaves the room, returning a minute later with his Walkman. I scoff as he slides in a cassette, the lid clicking closed. “You need an upgrade,” I say. “That thing’s ancient.”

He shushes me, adjusting the flimsy headphones over his ears as he holds down the fast-forward button. “It’s not *ancient*. It works fine.” Finding the right spot in the tape, he presses stop and hands me the Walkman.

I reach over to my nightstand, silencing the Hanson brothers before slipping on the headphones for myself. Charlie hesitates for a second, staring at the clutter of notebooks and glitter pens on my desk, and then he rolls out the swivel chair and sits. I press play.

The percussion starts up with a few fast beats, mellowing out as a breathy voice begins singing. Once the strings come in for the chorus, the voice turns into almost a moan, sighing about how great it would be to be killed by double-decker buses or ten-ton trucks.

I shoot a look at Charlie halfway through, questioning how this is better than my innocent pop albums, and he smirks.

Flutes flutter in and out through the end of the song, the strings swelling one last time, and then fading. I hit the stop button, pulling the headphones down around my neck. “Sounded a little depressing to me,” I say.

“It was the shit,” he insists, leaning back in the chair. “Girls went crazy if you told them you were into the Smiths.”

I trace along the faint scratches in the Walkman with a fingernail. There are a couple stickers plastered on the back, but the pigments have rubbed off and the vinyl's faded to white.

"Did you have a girlfriend?"

"You're always asking questions." He picks up one of my pens, tilting it upside down and watching the ink flow in the opposite direction. "No. Well, yeah. But I don't know what the fuck she's up to now. Probably married. Pregnant or whatever. The normal shit." He shakes his head.

"The normal *stuff*. Sorry."

"What was her name?"

He places the pen back on the desk—more delicately than I would have—and presses his hands into his knees, lifting himself out of the chair. "Doesn't matter now, does it?"

It's dim in my room; the sun has set and there's only one lamp on, in the corner. But I can tell his eyes have clouded over, his face shutting down again. He grants me a closing nod, and then turns, heading for the door.

I hold up the Walkman, headphones dangling. "Don't you want this back?"

He glances at me over his shoulder, one hand on the doorframe. "Keep it."

"Where are you going?"

"Work."

"It's only eight."

He sighs, in the hallway now. "So many damn questions."

"That wasn't a question," I say, but he's gone.

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I wake up to my alarm at six the next morning—the time that Charlie gets off work. It's Sunday; I don't bother changing out of pajamas or fixing my hair. I sit at my desk, wrapped in a blanket, my curtains pulled open slightly so I can better see the street.

Charlie appears between the gap a half hour later, and I lean forward to watch as he performs his little ritual: pausing in the driveway, kicking at some pebbles on the ground, staring up at the grey sky—almost like he's facing down an invisible barrier, one that will bounce him right back if he tries to step through. And then he steps through.

I hear the front door unlock, the jingling of keys, footsteps and creaking floorboards. I get up from my chair, opening my bedroom door to peek my head out.

The kitchen light is on, spilling into the den. Charlie's standing by the open fridge, his back facing me. He's gripping the handle as if it's the only thing holding him upright; his shoulders one straight, rigid line. Abruptly, he closes the fridge, bends over, and rests his forehead on the kitchen counter, arms coming up to shield his face. For a second, I think he's fallen asleep on his feet, slumped over like that. But then he picks himself up, moving out of my limited frame of vision. The kitchen light goes out, and the front door scrapes open again.

I hurry down the hallway, grabbing my sneakers off the rack and shrugging on a coat that's not even mine. Charlie's already halfway down the street, so I have to run to catch up with him, rubber soles slapping against the icy asphalt. My breath's coming out in white, crystallized puffs by the time he turns around.

“What are you—” he says, scar puckering as he furrows his brow, staring at me. “Why are you even awake? It's freezing. Go back inside.” He nods towards our house, hands stuck in his pockets.

I glance back, at my empty bedroom window and our front lawn, sparkling under the streetlight with frost. The sun is a faint pink on the horizon, not yet bright enough to light up the neighborhood. I don't move. "Where are you going?"

He shifts his feet, and I realize he's wearing Dad's beat-up hiking boots. He doesn't fit into any of his old shoes anymore. "I'm—nowhere. I'm taking a walk. Go back inside."

"Why can't I come with you?" I step up next to him, crossing my arms. Dad's coat sleeves hang, too long, from my fingertips.

Charlie drops his head, exasperated. "Because you can't, okay? I said so. Now, go back."

"No," I say, firm. "Why? Where are you going?"

His hands fly, out of his pockets and into the air. "Nowhere!" he says. On the telephone pole above us, a bird chirps, flapping its wings. "I don't know, all right? I don't know anything. Everything's different. Your music, that messaging shit, the cars people drive. You. You're different. You were just a kid—Jesus. Ten *years*, Emily." He exhales, shaky and slow, pulling a carton of cigarettes and a lighter out of his pocket. With fumbling fingers, he snaps the sparkwheel, unable to get a proper flame going until the third try. The heat radiates between us, pulsing red. "Whatever, it's fine. You don't understand. You're still just a kid."

"I'm as old as you were."

He blinks at me. The cigarette trails a tendril of smoke, lazy and loose, up to the sky. "Yeah," he says, swallowing. "I guess you are."

I sit down on the curb, drawing my knees up to my chest, but the cold still seeps in—stinging wet—through my fuzzy pajama pants. Charlie sits down next to me, offering me a cigarette. I shake my head.

"I wouldn't have given it you anyway," he says, slipping it back in the carton. "Bad habit."

I roll my eyes, but I'm smiling.

For the first time in the month he's been home, he smiles back.

We fall quiet. In this moment, I don't have any questions to ask, and Charlie doesn't have any answers to evade. I run my fingers through the grass of our neighbor's lawn, collecting the drops of dew and half-melted ice, forming a pool in my palms. I don't know how long we stay out there, but it's long enough for the sky to brighten. Charlie watches, silent and smoking, as I cup the reflection of the sunrise in my hands, pink and orange and full of light.