The Catalpa
2011-2012
where the current wasn’t as strong. A little ways down from where I stood was a miniscule fish, dead by the looks of him. He was lying amongst the rocks; there were two gaping holes where his eyes used to be and I could see his bony skeleton of a tail poking out beneath frayed, half-eaten skin. The sight of him so decomposed and alone was unsettling, so I turned my eyes away.

The sky was alive with the golden light of the half descended sun pushing through the wispy clouds. Reflected off the water, the light gave everything a very surreal glow. The trees on the opposite bank suddenly looked impossibly dark next to the pale pink color of the sky behind it. The pink slowly turned to a deep purple and then an intense orange before the sun completely sank into the tree line and a dull grey night started to creep up.

For a minute, I stood there, amazed. The encounter was quite spectacular; and I realized how special it was. A fleeting moment of perfection, a raw insight at the simplicity of nature, an unforgettable look at the intended order of things in the middle of a world wrought with metal buildings and synthetic people. A sunset, something so simple, but something so extraordinary at the same time. I thought about how the sun rose and set every single day; it didn’t take breaks, it couldn’t call in sick. Without it, the world would be lost in an endless dark; so instead, there it appeared every day, just waiting to be appreciated.

Simple as it was, common as it was, that sunset opened my eyes. In that instant, I remembered to breathe. All of the nervousness that I had pushed aside in the car, the nervousness about school, about my future, it all went away. It was the natural order of things, and it was time to move on. I was ready to move on.
Ever since that tour of the house, I always wanted to go inside it again, but unfortunately, it was sold not too long after I got to see it. But now, every time I look at it, I can still feel the musty air on my face and picture that brilliant red curtain.

As we passed the house, I navigated the car to the right, and began to ascend the steep hill that led up to my grandparent’s house. They were waiting on the porch, and crushed us in their arms when we finally got out of the car. They were so excited to see us, but their inquiries and non-stop stories were going to have to wait; it was almost sunset, and I needed to get down to the water before I missed it.

I hopped on my grandfather’s old bike, the kind that you have to brake with your feet instead of with your hands, and headed down the hill to the docks. When I reached the concrete parking lot, I abandoned the bike as I scrambled down a bed of rocks to get to the small sandy area that separated the manufactured town from the harsh, swift river. I remembered how when we were little, my sister and I used to search for seashells on the riverbank until we realized that rivers hardly produced the beautiful, multi-colored shells of the ocean.

For a minute I took in the view. The trees on the other side of the river were thick, dark, and daunting. I’d never been on that side, but I supposed it was more or less the same as it was here. As my vision narrowed, I noticed that the dark blue water tinted with pockets of green was wild today. I watched as a small branch quickly made it’s way on down the river; I watched it until it vanished from sight. The white, frothy mini-waves that padded the sand gave away the rushing water’s calm disposition. Nobody ever went swimming in the river; “it’s a death trap,” said my grandfather. He always warned us that the current and the rocky river bed sometimes made it hard for boats to stay afloat, let alone people.

The point where the water’s edge met the sand was littered with tiny little rocks and black and brown spiral shells. There were tree branches and sticks caught in clusters of what looked like algae but I knew to be weeds, gently floating in the light wake,
door had a perfectly unobstructed view of the water; the house was on a hill, and if you stood from the front steps, you could see for miles, you could see where the river gave way to lush trees, which then turned into a road. If you followed the road to the North with your eyes, you could see the beginnings of another river city, identical to this one, staring back at you.

A few years earlier the house was for sale, so my grandparents and I went to the open house, where I all but fell in love with it. The foyer was stunning, it seemed that sunlight alone decorated it, light yellow wallpaper and a white, cloth-covered bench greeted you as you walked in. To the left was a rickety, steep wooden staircase; to the right was a blood-red velvet curtain with golden embroidery and golden tassels, acting as a barrier between the entrance and the adjacent sitting room.

I headed first for the curtain, and pushing it out of the way, I laid my eyes on the most spectacular room I had ever seen. There was an enormous fireplace surrounded by plush red velvet furniture. On the mantle were exquisite golden statues, the biggest of them being a Buddha, sitting meditatively as his round belly obscured his legs. A floor lamp stood beside the couch, giving the windowless room a warm glow that reflected off of the fine gold trinkets and made me feel like I was about to discover treasure. I was standing on a thick bearskin rug, black in color, its head pointing towards the fireplace. In the corner, hiding behind a monstrous chess table with matching red chairs, I could see another staircase, this one narrower and steeper than the one in the entranceway.

I headed for the stairs to find them winding up and up, spiraling past the whole second floor. As I climbed, the air got heavier, so dense that I had to stop for a minute and catch my breath. Eventually I saw a light above me. When I reached the final step, I found myself looking out over the whole town through a circle of windows in the widow’s perch that I hadn’t even realized was there. It turns out that the house had been built during the Civil War and was used as a gathering place for Union soldiers and the perch was used as a covert lookout for roaming Confederate battalions.
The welcome sign had only been there for a few years and still looked new; a brown, oval shaped piece of wood that stuck five feet out of the ground. It said “Albany, population 901” in deep red letters set in front of a beautifully painted landscape of a quaint little town overlooking an impossibly blue river. There was even a little lighthouse painted on it, matching the real one almost exactly.

I rounded the bend in the road and the tiny town exploded before my eyes. The first landmark I saw was an old Victorian house, painted white with blue trim. In the windows were lace curtains, pulled shut to keep out the scorching sun. The porch faced the river, two well-worn rocking chairs sat unattended, separated by a glass table holding a pot of wilted flowers. After that, the houses got smaller, dumpier. It wasn’t until we had passed the deserted, rusty playground that I saw some of my favorite buildings in the world.

On my right was a modest antique shop where I had once found a large golden pocket watch that I unsuccessfully tried to convince my mother I needed, despite its $80 price tag. The shop’s owner lived upstairs and had a dog that always followed me around the store when I visited; the owner didn’t like me touching the merchandise, but he always pulled out the basket of pocket watches for me to look through.

On my left was my family’s favorite restaurant to eat at when we visited my grandparents. The Mississippi Café was very small, definitely not a fancy place, but their breakfasts were delicious. The walls were lined with old pictures of the town back when it was first founded. My favorite was a black and white photo of an old fire truck with a huge building in the background, titled “The Albany Fire Department.” I liked that one so much because the building in the picture was still standing; in fact, you could almost see it from the window of the café.

A little further on down the road, past the old gas station, I laid eyes on the house that I swore I would own some day. It was a two-story, yellow Victorian with white windows and a white door facing the west, towards the river. In fact, the
P. Meckley

The Red Wheelbarrow

I move the earth
And change the world

S. Abel

The Mississippi

The late July sun beat down through my window as I stared at the acres and acres of cornrows whipping by, only to be interrupted every now and then by a rusty old town that was gone before I could blink. It was a drive I had made so many times, but this time it was different; this time I wondered how long it would be before I made the trip again. I knew I would, eventually, but it seemed like everything I knew, everything I loved was coming to an end.

I focused my eyes on the road, my mom was sitting next to me, dozing off, and my sister had been passed out in the back seat ever since we pulled out the driveway, so my attention began to wander. I tightened my grip on the steering wheel and started to think about my recent decisions. Just six months earlier, I had made the phone call to Coach Jenny King informing her that I had decided to accept my softball scholarship and attend Kansas Wesleyan University in the fall. After I had hung up the phone, the nervousness had begun to settle in. I had no idea what it was like to live away from home, to be around people I didn’t know, and I was terrified.

As I was driving, thoughts swirled in my head, I tried to imagine what my roommate would be like or if the teachers would like me. I thought about my friends from home. I wondered if they would forget me, if my boyfriend would break up with me, but those thought caused a whole wave of worries to surface, so I pushed them aside. Instead, I focused on the road. There was a sign ahead that read “Albany – 12 miles”. I refrained from looking to my right, knowing that I would see the Mississippi River between patches of bright green trees. This was always a game I played; I tried to avoid looking at the river until sunset, when the light and water was prettiest. I almost always ended up failing, sneaking a look when I couldn’t take the suspense anymore.
decorative urn.

Matt and I stood at the precipice of that cliff we sat on with Lucas so long ago. It was sunrise Matt held the urn like you would an infant.

“Do you think we should say goodbye?” Matt looked over to me.


Matt stood there thinking for a moment, “Thank you, Lucas. For giving us your time here on earth. We didn’t deserve it.”

He looked at me, “Are you ready?”

“Yes.”

At this, Matt opened the urn and let the remnants of our friend catch the morning air and float to the river below.

***

Lucas is the water that runs through that valley and Lucas is the wind that cools our faces in the summer and Lucas is the sunlight that gives life to the forest and Lucas is the trees and Lucas is the dirt and Lucas is the grass. Lucas is unending and grand and overwhelming and perfect. Lucas is.

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Millennial Child

Today it is more than looking both ways before you cross the street.

Your children can’t drink from the garden sink.

Like world peace, Barney is no longer.

What doesn’t kill us only makes us stronger.

Pedophiles, murderers, rapists, and hoes,

The new definition of ‘everything goes’?

All she wants is acceptance,

No daddy in the picture.

Her body as a business,

Giving what she has to earn a dollar.

An innocent soul ripping at the seams,

Throwing away all aspirations and dreams.

“One Nation Under God”,

Or that’s what they say.

But National Day of Prayer gets taken away.

Captain Morgan in the evening,

Back-row Baptist in the morning.

Damn isn’t God’s last name.

Truth is, He isn’t the one to blame.
What the Woman with Alzheimer's Said
To Her Husband

Tanned, leathered, weathered skin
stretched over bleached white drying bones.
Is this what my life has become?
Doomed to wander barren wastelands
under a sunless sky.
I cry and scream out to my diseased captor
WHY?
I step on shards of broken memories and dreams.
It seems I have become one of the living dead.
I am in a tomb, but it is not sealed.
I cannot remember the moment
this truth was revealed.
Bleed from me all the names and faces
of those that matter.
Gather from me all recollection of a life
that was once mine.

Bind them to your heart and carry for me that part
of my consciousness that I will soon forget.
Think of me
though I am unable to think of you.
Come and seek me in the dark.
Bring me, if you can
back into the light.

Standing. She agreed. She didn’t want him to hurt anymore.

Melissa, that’s his wife’s name, left to go pick up the vestiges of her shattered family. She was shaking, but she never cried, a testament to her strength. I’m sitting in the waiting room, hiding from the truth with my laptop. I don’t want this to be happening. I want to be anywhere but here. Lucas is dead.

Matt got here right after Melissa left. I was sitting, blank faced, arms folded, holding my insides together, staring at the cheerfully yellow walls of the hospital waiting room. Lucas is dead. Matt walked in looking around for someone to give him information. He caught my gaze. I shook my head. He sank to the ground. Lucas is dead.

***

At the funeral, we were the only two wearing white. It was the stupidest conversation, but Lucas had told us that he didn’t like when people mourned the dead.

“They’re freer than we are. Why should we pity them and act like it’s some great tragedy that they’re gone? At my wake, you two wear something flashy. White.” He was sitting in the tree house when he said it. It was the last time we would see each other in Almont. We were drunk and happy and buoyant. It was the last day of spring break. The next day we’d go back to school, let each other fade into the background. The weight of his words settled around us. We hadn’t thought about death before. It was so far away. Why would he bring that up? We were young. Our lives were just beginning. We didn’t need to think about Death.

But now it was smothering us.

Matt and I were stars, pinpricks in black cloth. The remnants of a constellation long forgotten, save for a few scrolls, buried under the weight of time. The society that discovered us was gone and one of our points in the sky had gone out, our brightest star a blip in the universe. Now, we were barely visible in the infinite blackness.

Luke was ash now. An entire person poured into a
“Lise. How did this happen?” As I sat in his burning white hospital room, Luke asks me this. How did it happen? The resentment, the apathy, the falling apart.

I (somehow) graduated in the top of my class in Almont. I got an academic scholarship to NYU. Lucas was already at UCLA, but he managed to come home every once in a while and see Matt and I, but it was clear that he was changing. Matt had decided on a local school and was working three jobs to pay his own way.

At first, we called each other once a week. But as we started making other friends, it dropped down to about one call a month… And then two months… And then three months… Until finally the only time we ever spoke to one another was when we were home for the holidays and we crossed paths in the supermarket or at a restaurant, but the conversation was stiff, unnatural.

When Luke graduated, he started a pretty successful mountain gear company that’s been featured in hiking magazines and Wall Street Journal alike. Matt got a degree in communications and started his career as a producer in L.A.. I wrote.

This is a common story. We just lost touch. The distance between us became a lead wall. It wasn’t that we loved each other any less or even that we didn’t want to see each other, but with each minute, the memories that held us together frayed with the weight of new memories. It’s just a thread now. A single golden thread.

Lucas lost consciousness an hour ago. I was sitting by his side; his wife was asleep in the armchair next to me, her hand in his. His daughters were staying with their grandmother.

His last words to me were, “Maybe they’ll have green Jell-O today.” That was it. Nothing particularly deep, like in the movies. Mundane. He just fell asleep. The doctors came in

Some Haikus
Charles Santy

“(Un)Conscious”
Rain falls wet and gray
Life yearns to begin anew
They only see lights

“Versifier”
Words read off the page
Phony shadows thrown at us all
Excessive effort

“The Drone”
Noise flows through my soul
Seconds, minutes, forever
I’ll never have a choice
V. Robles

Coma

No other way to describe
This dark endless hole.
I hold no feelings
No love, no care for anyone
Just feeding off, anger and pain.
There’s no light
To show me the way,
Just wandering aimlessly
Through my dream like memories.

thin muddy brown and green in others. The individual trees below blurred into a thick, green carpet matting the mountainside across from us. The river was ancient, working slowly, patiently to cut its way into the mountain itself, creating a lush valley and shaping the cliffs we were standing on. It was awe-inspiring. I walked to the edge and sat, letting my legs dangle down. On my right, Matt plopped down, pulled out his sandwich and took an oversized bite and smiled goofily at me, his mouth full. I grinned at him as Luke found his place at my left.

I watched Matt as he swayed his legs boyishly over the ledge. He had smooth copper skin that only darkened with sun. He looked like the prince of some ancient kingdom. Beautiful and regal, but not at all ready for the responsibility of the crown. High cheekbones, big eyes, full pink lips that were permanently stretched into a smirk. He was always telling a joke inside his head, but never letting anyone in on it.


Completely still, he had his face upturned into the sun above our heads, he looked like a statue. Like a rock shaped from the endless beating of the sun and rain and wind, he was at home here. He was immortal here. Stone doesn’t need to be nourished by anything but the sun and the rain. He was a monument. He was a national treasure. I was engulfed with the impulse to lock him in a safe, out of harm’s way. But then I realized that he couldn’t ever leave here without becoming human again. This was where he belonged.

Overcome with affection for the two, I slung my arms around their necks and pulled them into a hug. We stayed there for a moment until Matt spoke.

“So, Lise, Lazarro? Is he at least a good kisser?”
And we laughed.

***

Our story isn’t one of betrayal or hatred or even selfish-
day... Mostly.

“Hey, Luke? What’s the plan for today? Are you making lunches?” I yelled while attempting to salvage the broken yolk in the pan.

“Uh. I think we should go up to the peak. It’s really cool up there. Like… cool as in awesome. Not cool as in freezing. It’s really high up and you can see the whole valley. I still think I could see Denver from there…” His voice was muffled as he got dressed.

I rolled my eyes, interrupting him before he could get started on one of his monologues, “Got it, Luke. Can you please make the lunches?”

“You can count on me, Lise.”

“How far is the peak?” I heard Matt ask.

“Oh, a few miles.” Something in his voice told me that it was more than just a few.

Luke was leading us. We were walking along a path that was barely visible under the brush. The woods were silent, save for a few scurryings in the brush and bird calls.

“Are we there yet?” Matt was whining. To be fair, we had been walking for almost three hours.

Lucas was cheerful, “Almost!” Matt and I exchanged an exasperated glance. He said that after the first hour.

“Lucas. By ‘almost’ do you mean within the next twenty-four hours or…?” He waved off my scathing remark and pointed at something ahead of us.

The trees started thinning and we could begin to hear clearly the rush of water from the river, farther away than it was at our camp. We began walking more quickly now; the dirt from the trail was sinking into the uneven gray rock. We finally broke the final layer of trees and looked out onto everything.

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ROSS

You are a wound to the heart
that will never quite heal.

You are a magician-
One moment here
the next - you are gone.

You are an artist-
Your premature sunrise
painted too dark - too red
to be sidewalk chalk.

You are a telephone call
at 1:30 in the morning,
and your mom drops the dishes.
They crash and shatter against the hard ground,
and the pieces ripple out into the corners and cracks-
and find us.

and now you are a wound
that will never quite heal.
“While these charges may be true,” he said it in his most dignified voice, “the choices I make are my choices and if you had a problem with them you should have said something. That being said, I’m calling the best friend rule on Derek Lazarro and you can’t do anything about it.” Lucas looked triumphant. Our social etiquette stated that should two of the friends disapprove of the third friend’s partner, they have the power to veto the budding relationship altogether. The Best Friend Rule. It was for the good of the group.

“I do, too.” Matt spoke quietly.

“You did not just call best friend rule on Derek Lazarro. We’re not even together.” I knew I had no counterargument and it infuriated me. We all agreed to the terms.

“I think we just did. Matt? Right? You can’t see him anymore.”

“Yeah. I’m sorry, Lise. He’s not right for you.”

“Ugh. Fine. I hate you two.” To be honest, Derek Lazarro was really only a phase. I got over him as soon as summer arrived and the college boys returned. “I’m going to bed. Remember to put out the fire.”

Big grins and then in unison, “Night, Lise.”

That was the happiest time in my life.

I woke up the next day at sunrise. It was definitely a spring morning in Colorado. The air was crisp and cold, but the sun shining just above the horizon warmed everything it touched. I opened my eyes slowly, looked to my right. Lucas and Matt were in their sleeping bags and were sleeping so soundly that they might as well have been murdered in the night by a maniac wielding an axe. I slipped quietly out of the tent into the yin and yang of the shining light meeting the chilly air. The effect was comforting. I took a deep, cleansing breath and went about starting a fire to make breakfast.

After an hour or so, a rustling in the tent and intermittent swearing told me my friends were awake and ready to take on the
an achievement is it? Just a rite of passage? Are you a real man, now?” The boys laughed at my remark.

Luke hollered over the fire. “Alright, Laurel, if you’re so much more respectable than me, which sorry boys have you been doing the nasty with?”

I raised my eyebrows. “Well, I made out with Derek Lazarro behind the gym last week, if you count that as ‘doing the nasty’.” The response was immediate and uproarious.

“Derek Lazarro is an asshole.” Lucas was literally rolling in the dirt laughing.

“Derek Lazarro is sexy.” I shot back.

“He’s in my history class. He got like a 12% on an open book quiz, Lise. What are you doing?” Matt smacked his forehead.

“I never said he was intelligent, I said he was nice to look at… and, you know, maybe stick my tongue down his throat every once in a while.”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa! Are you suggesting that this has happened more than once?” An incredulous stare from Luke.

“Only, like, 2… or 6 times.” I was enjoying their bewildered expressions far too much to stop.

“Look, Derek Lazarro’s okay if you like tall, muscular, pretty boy jocks with chiseled features and perfectly shaped brown hair—“ I interrupted Matt’s protest.

“Which I obviously do.”

“But Derek Lazarro is a total dip. You could do better, Lise.” Luke’s tone took a serious attitude that I wasn’t ready for.

“Oh, shut up, Luke. You’re the last one that should lecture me about who I decide to date. Didn’t you have sex with Rabbi Williams’ daughter on a Sunday? Or what about Brittany Coulter? While her boyfriend was in the next room playing Nintendo?”
He discovered that women were attractive and what was more, *they found him attractive*. Womanizing became his favorite sport and he was a natural. His smile could destroy a girl’s capacity for rational thought for days. He was smarmy and kind of a dick, but he still treated us like family, so we ignored his indiscretions.

Matt and I spent most of our time causing havoc in the town. We sported lifetime bannings from 15 of the 23 shops on Main Street by the time we were high schoolers and 20 by the time we graduated. Matt was naturally quiet and shy, but I was doing my best to be a terrible influence. He moved into Luke’s basement and did odd jobs around town to earn money. Lucas and I were his only friends and he seemed content with that.

The first night, we were sitting around the fire, wrapped in blankets, chatting over the flames. The sparks leapt and leapt and rose until their light died out in the air. Taylor River rushed about 100 yards away from where we set our camp. Lucas was the outdoorsy one. He had the tent and the water jugs and backpacks and foods that one needed to survive the wilderness (we were 20 minutes away from my front door should anything have gone wrong) and Lucas charmed mine and Matt’s mothers to the point that he could get them to agree with anything. So, there we were.

Laughter was the theme of the night.

Matt was mumbling embarrassedly, “I think I’m going to ask Maria Constance to Spring Fling.”

“Cute, Matt. You should ask her in homeroom next Monday.” I fully supported anything that would get Matt to step out of his cocoon of silence.

“She’s alright.” Lucas shrugged, “You know Kelly McCormick?” He asked Matt, eyes alight with some secret.

“Yes… Doesn’t she work at the diner? Brunette? Blue eyes? Tall? She’s pretty. You gonna ask her?” Matt shrugged.

Lucas scoffed, “No way, man. I totally slept with her.” Poor, innocent Matt gaped at this and I rolled my eyes.

“Yeah, you and the rest of the high school. It’s not really
guess I’ll see you whenever you decide to make us important again.” That stung, but not as much as the sound of the phone hitting the receiver and the dead air that faded into dial tone and the flat melody that beat against my ear.

***

“Tell them about camping.” Lucas was watching television, flipping between an overacted, underfunded soap opera and a cooking show whose hostess was irritatingly bubbly. He looked completely serene. Horrible and emaciated and pale, yes. But more than those, he was peaceful.

“Say what?” I looked up from the housekeeping magazine in my lap.

“I know you’re not going to put that camping trip in that story of ours because it’s obvious. You should. The first one. It’s more meaningful. Isn’t that what you writers look for? Meaningful bullshit? Like in Catcher in the Rye? Remember reading that for Morris? Yeah. I always thought the hunting hat was just a hat, but—“ His words were stifled by an awful racking cough that shook his insubstantial body in over exaggerated seizures of ghastly, grating, choking convulsion that didn’t seem to have an end.

It did. And when it did, Luke leaned back in the bed and closed his eyes and I told him, “I’ll write about the camping trip, Luke.”

***

We were camping for five days in compliance with our yearly spring break tradition. This was the first year. Matt and I had just turned 14 and were just about ending our careers as the worst freshmen the Almont school system had ever seen, while Lucas had turned 16 in the winter and was exploring the new boundaries of semi-adulthood. Over the course of the past two years, he had grown into his lanky frame. He was almost 6’3” and he had surpassed the goofy, “I-just-grew-six-inches-and-I-have-no-muscles-to-cover-my-bones,” stage and became a well sculpted man. He kept his blonde hair long, covering his eyes.

In a kingdom far, far away, stood a pretty pink castle where Princess Adi lived and played.
Before they had the chance to spill over, Lucas reached over and in one smooth movement (that led me to believe he wasn’t quite as drunk as he was acting) wrested the whiskey from Matt’s shaking hands and pulled the trembling boy into a hug.

He sat there and let Matt cry into his shoulder for ten minutes. He told him it would be okay. He told him that no matter what, he was loved. By us. He wouldn’t ever have to look anywhere else for what he needed. We were here.

***

Matt and I were best friends in our own quiet way. He and I would go on long hikes together in the woods near our houses. We both read voraciously and would often spend entire days on the soft couches in the library, our nose buried in books, exploring new worlds, but always together. We never had to say much to each other. Our friendship was very much a psychic one. We shared more looks than words. Matt and I had a vast understanding of each other.

I think that’s why Matt was so angry about Lucas and me leaving. He felt betrayed. We made these oaths that we had no way of keeping and he felt lied to. His star didn’t shine as brightly as ours, or so he thought. He wasn’t special enough. He wasn’t good enough. These were complexes that Matt had dealt with his entire young life. He didn’t want to impose on anyone. He never felt like he was truly accepted.

The last time I spoke to him before tonight, he was upset. He was hurt.

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“But you promised you’d be able to come home…” His voice cut apart my insides. Even over the phone, I could hear the injury in his voice. He sounded like a heartbroken child.

“…I know, but this internship all but fell into my lap and I can’t pass this up, Matt. I’m sorry.” I really, truly was. Could he
tree house one night after homecoming my sophomore year. My knees were pulled to my chest, my feet hidden behind the completely horrendous, frilly, yellow dress I bought from the thrift store, the boys in their father’s suits, ties undone.

We were passing around a bottle of whiskey that Matt had stolen from home. It was the first time I had ever been drunk and my cheeks were flush and my fingers and toes were tingling and I had a hard time focusing on anything, but Lucas’ words stuck to some neuron in my brain and wrapped themselves around it.

Matt passed the bottle to me and I took a healthy sized gulp. The bittersweet liquid smoldered in my throat. I passed the bottle to Lucas.

“What are you talking about, Luke?” Matt’s words seemed slow to my brain. Creeping, slinking their way across my temporal lobe and settling finally in a place where I could grasp it.

Lucas spoke again, his words gliding out of his mouth messily, “Like, when someone fucks up your day by saying something or tripping you or something… you know? The person doing it isn’t like this crim-criminal mastermind. What they did is bad, not them as a person, geddit?” He took another drink and passed the bottle to Matt.

My eyelids felt heavy. I could fall asleep there, right then, sleep forever.

“But what about people like my fa-fath—Like my dad?” Matt’s eyes were always the primary indicator of his emotions. They were wide and turning between Luke and me in their torment, looking for an answer. He gripped the bottle tightly and looked like he was going to cry.

“But Matt.” It was my voice this time. I couldn’t feel my lips as they were moving. “Your dad… He-he just can’t control himself.” I felt as though my head was weaving back and forth as I spoke, “He’s not bad, he’s just—just—“
Instead of looking up to our guardians, we looked up to each other. We were each other’s idea of family.

“Well,” Matt’s luminous tone told me that the pressure was off and he was changing the subject, “Let’s go to the library.” He didn’t give me a chance to protest, but instead, he stood up, stretched, and reached a hand down to help me up.

***

Most people think that Lucas was my best friend. He was great, but he was more like a brother to me than anything. He took care of me. That first day in the park, he saw something broken in me and decided to fix it. Like he had fixed Matt. Like he had fixed his father. Like he would fix the kind, but sad woman he married. Lucas has this radiance that warms everything around him. He’s never hated anyone. He’s not capable of it. In fact, he’s not capable of anything but love.

When the nurse walks in every day and pricks him and pokes him with needles and gives him medicine that makes his vision blur and asks him cheerily how he’s feeling, he tells her that he’s doing just fine, thankyouverymuch and to tell her cat (Mr. Fluffers, incidentally) that he says hello.

When the doctor comes in looking somber and coldly professional, Lucas makes a joke about the state of some celebrity in a magazine he’d read the other day.

When his wife looks like she can’t bear it anymore, he gets her attention and makes her promise not to cry and when she does, he tells her that she’s beautiful and perfect and that maybe he’ll take her to Maui tomorrow and wouldn’t that be great?

He pretends that he’s not hurting because he loves everyone too much to let them down. Every single person that exists, has existed, or will exist is loved, if not by those around them, then by Lucas and Lucas alone.

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“People aren’t shitty, their actions are.” Luke slurped this in the
“You sound like my grandmother.” I picked up a tennis shoe from my side and threw it at his head (he dodged it with ease, the shoe hit the wall feebly and landed somewhere behind my bedside table), “Anyways,” I continued, “if I’m bored, you’re boring.”

“Well,” He sighed, “we could go to the park.”

“No. That hasn’t been fun since Martin Tobias broke the last good swing and Shelby Donovan stuck 36 wads of gum in the slide.” I had counted.

“We could go to Vicky’s Diner and get shakes.”

“With what money?”

“We could ask our parents.”

I laughed, “Matt, I haven’t seen my mother since last Tuesday. But, yeah. Let me find her and ask her for a couple bucks so I can gallivant around Almont to get ice cream.”

“First of all: gallivant? Who even says that? Second of all: where’s your mom been?” Concern glowed in his eyes.

I shrugged, my voice got quiet, “This is around the time he left. My dad, I mean. She’s usually… off around this time every year. But it’s really bad this time.”

Matt stared at me for a moment. We usually didn’t talk about our situations at home. My family life was cheerless at its best. My mother operated under different levels of depression (the diagnosis of which would come after I had graduated college) and she locked herself in her room for days at a time and would only emerge for the occasional meal. Matt’s dad was never there and when he was, he was drunk and mean. His mother spent most of her time dodging her husband’s swings (mood or otherwise) and was ineffective by way of support. Lucas’ mom died in a car wreck when he was two, leaving him and his father to try to return to some semblance of a normal life.
We’re all languishing in our own personal haze of mediocre gloom, our own anemic crises, and then something more dark and urgent grabs us by our lapels and shakes us, throws us to the ground, kicks us a few times for good measure, and leaves us there.

Everything besides what Lucas wants is irrelevant now. I’m sitting in a hotel room. The walls are yellowing and the sheets smell like sweat and vinegar and the bathroom has the scent of bleach with an underlying hint of decay. Gunshots punctuate the night far more frequently than my keystrokes, but that’s unimportant. Death is here. He’s breathing down our necks.

I called Matt tonight. I needed to. Lucas wants to see him. I was walking to a Chinese takeout place for dinner and I figured I needed to get it over with. Like a band-aid. Or presenting in front of a large group of people (let’s be honest, that old “trick” of picturing everyone in their underwear is a bunch of garbage). …Or facing someone you’ve disappointed.

I dialed the numbers slowly, double checking that I was typing them correctly and once I finally placed the phone to my ear, I was praying that he’d be out. Or he was eating. Maybe he worked nights. Or he didn’t have a phone. Or he forgot it at work. Or he changed his number. Or he was having a party and couldn’t hear the phone over the thumping of music.

It rang once. And then twice. A third ti—

“Mmmyellow?” And there he was.

***

“I’m so bored.” I draw out the last word into a long whine. It was the summer before Matt and I started high school. Lucas had a job in his father’s auto repair shop and we were left to fend for ourselves on weekdays.

I was sitting on the floor against my desk, but as I spoke, I slumped sideways onto the worn carpet of my room.

Matt was sitting at the edge of my bed, legs swinging; he was quick with his snarky reply, “If you’re bored, you’re boring.”
“This is Matt. He’s my best friend. We’re going to be astronauts one day.” We had reached the boy waiting at the swing set. He was closer to my age than Luke, shorter than the talkative boy, dark skin, dark hair, dark eyes and his face set in a permanent grin.

He looked me over for quite some time, nodded, *spat on his hand*, and reached out for a handshake.

I hesitated. And then after some thought, I returned the gesture.

And with a misplaced understanding of WWII history (we were crushed when we learned that the *Nazis* were, in fact, people) and a disgusting, boyish tradition, we became friends.

We were inseparable. Mondays we were at the park, Tuesdays were the movie theater, Wednesdays were the public pool, Thursday and Friday we sought refuge in my attic, and on the weekends, we were holed up in our tree house in Luke’s backyard. That year was spent in that childish concept of the never-ending summer. Everyday is Saturday and you’re never going to be responsible for anything.

***

I wish I was eight again. I wish I could retain the irrepressible optimism that leaves with childhood. I wish I could see my best friends every day. I wish people never got sick. I wish the world was limited to Almont, Colorado. I wish I could wake up tomorrow morning and go to that horrible hospital and that doctor would look optimistic. That he’d stop using words like *metastasized* and *abnormal* and *prognosis*. Those horrible, hard-hearted things make me feel sick.

It’s late. I’m being unreasonable. The world is never how you’d like it to be. The hot water runs out in your shower. You find a gray hair. Your dog runs away. The milk goes bad. Your alarm doesn’t wake you up. You’re late to the most important day of your life.
“Hello,” said a voice from up in the trees.

Princess Adi was surprised to see a dragon hiding in the leaves.

one of those mutes, aren’t you? It’s okay, I—“ That was enough.

“I am not. You talk too much,” I was glaring now.
“Didn’t anyone ever tell you that it’s rude?”

“Guess not,” he shrugged, and as an afterthought, he added, “So… What’s your name?”

“Elise. My name is Elise. And I come here every day because—“

He grinned, cutting me off, “Matt and I are playing war. Do you want to be a knotzie?”

“What—what’s a knotzie?”

“It’s like a… Like a type of bird, I think.” His face was screwed up in concentration. “On TV, the good guys always have to shoot down the knot-zies.” He emphasized this new word.

“Why would I ever want to be shot?” I was mildly intrigued by this boy and his enthusiasm.

“Oh. I’m sorry. You can be a good guy, then. I’ll make Matt be the knotzie. We’ll shoot him outta the skies. We just really need a third man—woman,” he corrected himself, nodding towards me, “to play. Jason isn’t allowed to hang out anymore after we used his basement to play war this winter and kinda sorta broke his dad’s big screen with a baseball bat.” He leaned in close, “I don’t really mind though, Jason is kind of a butthead. But anyways, are you coming or not?”

I sighed, sliding off the bench. “Sure. Okay. But we shouldn’t kill the bird. We can tame it and it can be our pet. What does it look like?”

My new friend was absolutely delighted. He started talking a mile a minute, while leading me to his companion, who was waiting patiently by the swings. “Well, a knotzie is as big as a bus and it’s black and red and it’s got these huge talons and it has a frill on its head and its beak can cut through diamonds and if we want to catch it we’ve got to have a giant net. And probably a stun gun. And a tank. And some grenades. And a rifle.” He stopped to take a breath.
Rockies, carved in thirds by the Taylor and East rivers, which swerves and slivers itself down to meet the larger and faster Gunnison river, which then goes on to join the thick, green, monstrous Colorado River.

Its citizens make their living by swindling foolish travelers out of their vacation money, renting river guides and skis and stupid shirts that claim, “Someone in Almont loves me,” or “Someone went skiing in Almont and all I got is this stupid t-shirt,” or my personal favorite, “In most states, getting this high is illegal.” The good citizens of Almont were an odd blend of eccentric hippies, still hiding from the horrors of cubicle life, and the fantastically rich, still looking for a way to buy happiness.

We moved at the start of summer. My mom was working every day as a secretary at a river rafting company and would leave before I’d even wake up. At first, she encouraged me to make friends my own age, but I’d rather spend my time watching. As a child, I had a fascination with other people’s lives and finding that my house was near a large park, I found myself walking there everyday to study people going about their lives in order to avoid my own.

The third week after I moved, as I settled into the swing preparing for my usual day of people watching, a boy, a little older than me, tall and gawky with blond hair that had grown past his ears, jumped onto the swing next to me.

Words spilled out of his mouth like water from a faucet… Maybe more like water from Niagara Falls.


I gaped; no one had ever spoken to me at that park before.

“Ohhh,” He seemed to understand something, “You’re

She smiled in delight as the dragon glided gracefully to the ground.

“But you are not a PINK dragon,” she said with a frown.
cracked, but it was unquestionably his. Luke’s. No one had called in years, “Lise. I need to see you.”

He didn’t even tell me what was wrong. I got on the first plane to Denver and found him in room 417 of St. Joseph’s Hospital. It was awful. When I walked into the room, his daughters were sitting on either side of the bed, babbling in the way that young children do, his wife looked tired and deflated. He looked up. I wanted to cry. He smiled. I wanted to collapse. He was alabaster white. I cracked a joke about him looking like a geisha. Everyone was uncomfortable. He was bony. Way thinner than anyone could naturally be. His hair was gone. All of it. His lips were cracked and pale and oh, God it hurt to see him. The daughters, Samantha and Elizabeth, were ushered out of the room by his wife, tall and ginger haired and beautiful and weary and sad. She smiled down at me as she passed.

His lungs labored to find breath to speak. They sounded paper thin. “Hey, Lise. You gotta do me a favor….Lise, I’m dying”

I want to remember Luke as I knew him—know him. He was tall and vibrant. He was comically skinny when we first met and in his later years, girls were drawn to his charisma and his angelic features, although the way he treated them was less than angelic. His blonde hair always covered his eyes. And his eyes. They’re the clearest blue. Entire oceans you can swim in. Skies you could fly in. He was… is beautiful.

There were three of us. Lucas, Matt, and me.

***

My dad left when I was five. My mother, of course, was heartbroken. We moved to Colorado three years later. I think in the years after my father’s departure it physically pained my mother to be in the same climate where they fell in love. We left California in a Sedan piled high with our things, with me waving at my grandparents through the rear window.

Almont, Colorado is a tiny town that’s more populated by tourists than actual residents. It’s hidden in the broad mountainside of the
He wants to be remembered. Not just remembered as Lucas Steven Legard, 3 time swimming champion at the Colorado state swimming competition, graduate of UCLA’s business program, business owner, or whatever else some obituary will write about him. He’d rather you think of him as a friend. This, he says, are what make a man. What we can really judge someone by. He doesn’t want to be seen as “some fucking Lifetime movie tragedy.” Cheesy, right? But he’s the one with cancerous brain cells and less than 3 months to live, so we give him what he wants.

He wants me to begin this story a week ago, when he called me for the first time in 7 years.

I was staring at a blank word document. There’s nothing more confining or more freeing than a blank word document. The awful infinity of it all. I have the capability of creating entire universes, populations, creatures, in the confines of my laptop.

It was a standard case of writer’s block. It was 4:58 AM. I hadn’t slept yet. The steady hum of morning traffic already permeating the grimy windows of my apartment, there were the people on their way to be productive and contribute to society. What have I accomplished? Nothing. Nothing since that wonderful, impeccable, work of art that critics absolutely adored. Left them raving, begging for more. Wondering what I could come up with next. Great. I’m an absolute failure and I’m not even 25.

The shrill slice of the phone hacked at the monotone grumbling of rush hour, I stared at the phone, stunned for a moment. My publisher wasn’t due to call for another nine hours. Still staring, spellbound at the blinding nothingness in my computer, I reach out and pick the phone off the cradle.

“This is Elise Laurel.” My voice dragged, heavy with exhaustion. I caught my reflection in the mirror next to my desk. I looked terrible. My blonde hair was frazzled and unkempt in a way that spoke only of sleeplessness and the green of my eyes were overpowered by the dark shadows underneath them. I hadn’t worn makeup for days. I looked back at the screen.

“Lise.” That name. His voice sounded weak and tired and
Do you know when you stare at a word for too long and it starts to look flawed? The letters start to move and mutate and before you know it, you’re second guessing yourself. And now when you speak and hear these words, the syllables slip out of your mouth sloppily. Your tongue is swollen, frozen, can’t form the word properly. It falls on your ears askance, bounces a couple times, doesn’t quite fit through your ear canal. For a moment you become unable to comprehend all words, derive meaning from their syllables, struggling to grasp each plosive as they strike your eardrum before they float away into the dead air around you.

I wish this would happen now. That I would lose the meaning of death, dying, demise, fatality, mortality, loss of life. Sweet ignorance. Each time I hit the letters on the keyboard, the word only seems to grow stronger, more unmistakable in shape and meaning.

But it’s always here. Always breathing down my neck. And when Luke tells me, the word hangs in the air like some awful, poisoned, rotten fruit on a tree.

“Lise, I’m dying.” Like that. How can that happen? Such a big concept – a tremendous idea – stuffed into, ripping the seams out of a single word. DEATH. It’s funny how much we rely on words. Letters arranged in a way that gives them meaning. But how can any expression, cliché, utterance, statement tell you how I feel in this moment?

I want to scream and cry and laugh and be and die and live and destroy and run away and go home and hit him and hug him and hold him and tell him that everything will be okay and call my mother and curse God and go to church and cry and cry and cry.

No one can ever describe what it’s like to feel everything at once. Or what to do when you feel like you’re suffocating under all that emotion. That would be a useful class. Better than Calculus anyway… “How to Deal with an Overwhelming Series of Emotions 101.”

But I’m losing focus...

The dragon tilted his head and sighed, “But I like how I am,” he replied.

“Wouldn’t you rather have something different, something unique?”

“There is really no reason why you can’t like something besides pink.”
Princess Adi had never considered liking another color. It had always been pink and no other.

“You’re right,” she said after some thought. “I LIKE purple with orange polka dots.”
So Princess Adi learned a lesson that really made her think.

All because she met a dragon who wouldn’t be pink.
To my niece(s) and nephews, who decided that Auntie really isn’t that bad of an artist.

And to my siblings, because you have always put up with me, and always will <insert evil grin>.

I love you all.
“And that, my son, is how you got your name.”

“And that, my son, is how you came.”

“For all that, we are not the same, nor was it normal how you came.”

“Remember, always, for you know it’s true”

“I love you, my dear, quite through and through.”

The End
He ran home and said, “Mother, I know,”
“I came from a place with white stuff called snow.”
“My fur is so thick, such a fine shade of gray,”
“Too much so for an African day”
His mother said with a very sad mew,
“I’m very sorry to say that it’s true”
“You are not the same as we from the African plain”
“Have you ever seen a leopard fly?”
“For you came in a box that fell from the sky”

“It was marked fragile and handle with care. Your country of origin we know not where.”

Wendie had never looked at a bug like that before;

What was this little bug on her tail?
He slept and he dreamed, a very deep dream,
For to him it very much seemed
Like he was somewhere else, in a land covered in cream.

And the howl of the wind was so loud and so thin
And blew through the fur that covered his skin
He woke with a start and a hard pounding heart
He was very happy, he felt very smart
And why are always so very hot?” they purred
Fragile (for that was his name) sat up with a start
“I AM kind of different, or so I’ve always thought”
“But mother always said that really I’m not.”
Fragile got up and trotted away
From the two little sisters who wanted to play
He felt kind of sad and little bit bad,
As he thought and he thought about all he was not.
He felt like he should leave today and go very far away...
To a place that wasn’t quite so hot;
And it wouldn’t matter what he was and was not.
He walked and he walked and walked all day,
Until he found a place to lay and as he laid down to try and sleep,
He found himself ready to weep
For he missed his mother as well as the others
And the way they all used to creep together to sleep.
He got too hot to trot and hop and play
So under the cool bushes he went to lay
To hide from the heat on this fine African day;
His fur is so thick- such a fine shade of gray
But a little too warm to play on such a very hot day.

“Not today,” he said with a yawn
“I’d rather go play in the nice cool dawn”
“Why is your fur so thick? And always makes you so tired and sick?”

His two little sisters came to the bushes to say that he should come and run and play

The bug’s legs were shaped like the spider’s, and so was its head, but the spider had too many eyes and too many legs. It couldn’t be a spider.
He was having a wonderful time as he jiggled and jiggled

He pounced and wiggled and danced and giggled

Untiiiil...

Wendie decided to ask her friends living in the forest. She went to the pond and asked Miss Frog, but she didn’t know what the bug was.
Wendie then asked her friend Mr. Snake, but he didn’t know either.

A happy little leopard went out to play
On a fine and warm African day
From that moment on, Wendie and Drina shared many adventures, but their favorite story was how Wendie discovered the odd little bug on her tail.

Wendie went and asked Thad the Thingamajigg. After looking at the bug closely, Thad said, “I know what it is!”
“It is a dragonfly!” Thad said.

“So that’s what you are, a dragonfly!” Wendie exclaimed. “I think I’ll name you Drina, and we can go everywhere together!” The dragonfly buzzed in happiness at learning it’s new name.