

Stages of Blue

by

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Stages of Blue

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ABSTRACT

This anthology includes two different collections. The first collection follows a young woman struggling with mental illness. Her childhood and the timeline of her life and how the illness progresses in time is recorded. The young woman mainly struggles with depression, anxiety, and bipolar disorder in different aspects of her life throughout the years. This not only deals directly with the aspects of mental illness, but also shows how it can affect relationships, jobs, and relying on doctors for answers.

The second collection focuses on flash fiction stories. They do not follow a character or issue, but the idea of finding an identity seems to be an issue throughout them. They focus on different emotions people can go through daily. The basis behind them were to try and make those emotions felt from a scene.

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Light eyes

They say the eyes are the windows into the soul. They say that if someone really stares deep enough and long enough they can really see who you are inside. But what if your windows are dirty and covered in shit? You try to whisper your breath and wipe away the fog, but nothing happens. You try to rub away the gunk and crusty pieces stuck in your eyes...or windows...or whatever the fuck you want to call them, but your vision still isn't clear. Maybe this is why no one can really see my soul or who I am. Maybe if my eyes could decide on a color for longer than a day, people could really see me.

I was born with natural baby blues. Most babies are born with cobalt colored eyes, but not me. From what my parents tell me, my eyes were the color of the water of the Maldives; crystal clear at first glance, but the deeper you travel, the darker they become. People always comment on my eyes. They tell me how beautiful they think they are or how envious they are of them. I'll admit it, I like the way they light up when my dark hair brushes against my pale skin. I think I was meant to have blue eyes, I just wish people could see what goes on inside them. They don't see the way they change from their cerulean glow to foggy ash when it begins to rain outside. They don't see the secret meteor shower happening around my iris; tiny white speckles fall like rain drops all around my pupil. The changes outside call to me. They are me and I am them, but no one has yet witnessed this.

They think the girl with blue eyes is happy, is calm, is a nice girl; but they don't see the way my sparkling sapphires turn to the color of damp seaweed when my heart and mind have had enough. Very few people have seen my swamp eyes; the eyes that appear after the world has taken its toll on me. I feel so connected to this Earth, to this world, to

the things we cannot see or prove. It eats away at me on a constant basis...but you'll never see that, I'll only show you my baby blues.

Maybe the reason people can't peer through my windows and see my soul, is because I don't want them to. I don't have the ability to control my shifting palette, but I do have the ability to hide it. I don't want people to see the real reason for my blue eyes; I just want them to admire them. For if I think they saw the real baby blues, their whole outlook on me would be forever changed.

Why would I want someone to see that the real reason I have dazzling blues? Only to find the awe of them is a lie. They hide the real blue that lives inside me. The color of a starless sky that haunts me throughout the day.

My eyes grew darker fourteen years ago, when I was just entering high school. The doctors told me that what I was experiencing was a mix of depression, bipolar disorder, and anxiety. How ironic to worry about everything and nothing all in one thought. Once again, I become the walking contradiction. It's been 14 years now, and sad to say, I'm surprised I'm still here. There were moments I thought I wouldn't make it to the next hour.

Tell me; are you still envious of the girl with dazzling eyes?

Really? Still?

...

Yeah, I didn't think so.

I knew the charm would eventually wear off of my baby blues.

Have You Seen Me?

My name is Rachel Taylor and I lost myself fourteen years ago.

It came without a warning. One minute I was fine, normal even; the next I was gone. The girl that looked back at me in the mirror was now someone I didn't even recognize. Her face looked like mine in the shimmering glass, but the etched marks engraved around her mouth were not something I was familiar with.

I know I'm still in there somewhere, but I can't seem to find me. Do you see me?

I seem to ask myself that question a lot anymore. It's hard enough being a teenager and trying to figure out who you are, but when depression interrupts that, it all goes to shit. I've been completely lost within myself for what has seemed like forever. I still look the same. My smile is still the same when it does make an appearance, and when I do laugh it still echoes loudly like before, but people can't see my insides and the darkness that has consumed them. I haven't recognized myself in a handful of years, and at this rate, I'm not sure I ever will.

The light blue eyes that everyone admired had now shadowed my face in darkness. What was happening to me? I knew it had to do with him. I remember the night he died, all too well in fact. It's already been fourteen years, but ever since that night I knew a part of me died with him.

I know I'm still in there somewhere, but I can't seem to find me. Do you see me?

I regret everything. I hate the fact that he was dying while I was laying on some beach with my parents. They wanted to take me on a family trip before I entered my first year of high school. I knew it wasn't the right time though. I told him I loved him before we left. I told grandma to keep an eye on grandpa and to call us if his health changed.

On the second night of our vacation I had a dream. I was standing in the back of a crowded room. I didn't know where I was at first, but then I saw everyone crying, and realized I was standing at a funeral. The crying reverberated in my ears. It was loud enough to make anyone go insane. Hands began pushing me through the crowd. I could feel my feet skidding across the floor, trying to resist. I got to the front of the room and there he was lying perfectly still in the casket. My grandfather. My hero. My everything. I woke up with pearl beads dripping down the side of my forehead. I knew this tornado was just winding up and would hit home very soon.

My grandpa, besides my father, was always someone I looked up to. He served our country in the time of war, he protected people as a security guard for a living, and when he retired his next big job was to keep me laughing (which he always did). I think people always got the wrong idea about him. He was a pretty big guy, wide like a linebacker. His tummy full of Italian and Hungarian food always hung a little too far over his belt. The few salt and pepper strands of hair he did have left were combed neatly towards the left side of his head and his small coke bottle glasses perfectly emphasized his large dark pupils. He always had a straight laced face, but when he smiled, boy did it light up the room. By the looks of him you never would have thought he was a giant, cuddly teddy-bear-of-a-man. I try to remember those memories the most.

He always had a deep cough. I noticed it since I was little. I thought it was from all the years of smoking (which I guess part of it was). I remember patting him on the back when I would sit in his lap; trying to burp the coughs out of him like a child.

It wasn't until I got older that I realized why he was always wheezing. Emphysema. I thought the huffing and puffing after climbing the steps was just because of old age or his gut, but it was this monster slowly cutting off his airway. He was an avid smoker and my grandmother still is. I have vivid images of clouds of smoke dancing around my head when I was little. Who knew that smoking and working in a factory would be a deadly combination?

The doctor's put him on a portable oxygen tank his last year on Earth. If it wasn't enough the man could hardly catch his breath, now he had this little tank on wheels haunting his every step. A constant reminder that things were getting worse. I knew he wasn't going to make it much longer. He kept saying how he wanted to die; how he didn't want to live his life like this. He kept saying he was ready to let go, but I wasn't. Grandma wasn't. Dad wasn't.

It's hard not to let the memory of the last time I saw him haunt me. I think it is something that will eat away at me the rest of my life. I try to shake it free, but in the middle of the night it lurks in dark corners of my brain and awakens my nightmares.

#

The Night It Happened- August 2, 2002(fourteen years ago)

Gray and lifeless, that is the last image I have of him in my head. The paramedics carried his limp body to the ambulance right before my eyes. I knew he was going to die that morning, but I at least thought I would get to say good-bye.

I had told Mom to call my grandparent's house to make sure he was okay, but she wouldn't listen. Maybe if she had called, I could have been there to see him take one more breath. But that's not what happened. The night dragged on and I was wide awake.

I paced my room for hours in the middle of the night. My gut told me something was wrong. I knew it was him. Our bond was more than just words spoken, it was feelings and emotions, and right now I was feeling that he was in serious trouble. I knocked on mom and dad's door repeatedly, telling them to call him; they thought I was crazy.

"It's the middle of the night, Rachel, go back to bed, everything is okay," mom said in a muffled, half asleep voice.

"But, Mom, you need to call Grandma's house!" I said frantically. "Something is wrong!" no response, just her snores echoed the silence in the room.

I was so frustrated, I couldn't sleep knowing that he was in pain, and if my eyes did close, I only saw him and the shock would wake me even more abruptly.

I forced myself to get back in bed, protected by some awful neon comforter I picked out for my birthday. Thank God I don't have the taste of a fourteen year old girl anymore. The fetal position was my first idea; maybe it would comfort me, but instead I ended up on my back staring wide-eyed at my ceiling. *Why weren't they listening to me? Did they not love him as much as I loved him? I could try and save him. I could comfort him like all those times he was there for me.* A million things crept through my mind. I finally decided to squeeze my eyes shut and force myself to be calm. A sound stopped that from happening. A sound that usually was a charming sound to hear, now became a sound of panic; a sound like a thousand ambulances coming down your street.

The phone rang a little after four in the morning and the panic sank in.

"Mike, Rachel, get up! Grandma says Grandpa collapsed in the kitchen and isn't moving! Let's Go!" I've never seen my parents so startled before. Everyone jumped out of bed, threw shoes on, and dashed to the car. Even though Grandma only lived a few minutes down the street, it seemed like it took forever to get to him.

This scene was all too familiar to my mother. She had already lost both of her parents at a young age. My father though has really never lost anyone close to him. I don't think he prepared himself for the worse. I mean, how could you? How could you possibly be ready or prepared to lose a parent? I'd never seen him so alert. He was staring blankly at the windshield but his eyes were piercing. It felt like the glass was going to shatter. We arrived at the house and pulled into the grass on the side of the garage. Lights danced across the front of the house like tiny fireworks of red and white being shot off.

Two ambulances and a mob of paramedics swarmed the house. Their house was a big two story home painted a faint pink color with white shutters. A quaint mailbox with their names etched in the side sat at the bottom of the front porch steps. The lawn looked freshly mowed. The scene was quiet. From the outside it looked peaceful and welcoming. From the looks of it, you wouldn't think that an old man just took his last breath on the kitchen floor. You probably wouldn't think that the stuff of my nightmares was created in there.

When entering my grandparent's house you were stuck in the middle of the house through the front door. You could either walk right downstairs to the basement, or climb a flight of stairs to the kitchen and family room. That's where the paramedics were all lined up. I couldn't see him. I saw a fat foot dangling over the top step. It looked a bit stiff, toenails pointed straight to the ceiling. I tried to sneak in behind the paramedics to climb the steps, but my mother grabbed the back of my coat and told me to wait downstairs. Her and my father would investigate.

I was told to stay in the basement, that I shouldn't be in the way or see such a traumatic thing happen. It was probably the most devastating moment of my life; to know that I had to sit in the cold, dark basement alone, while my hero was possibly dying in the room above my head.

The thought of him dead made tears gush down my face like an endless river; I couldn't control myself, I had to know what was going on. I crept up the steps and slid behind the paramedics that were lined up on the staircase. I could feel the shock settle in as I hit the last step at the top. There he was, his body looked bloated, and all of the color

was drained from his face. I almost didn't recognize him. I had never seen a dead body before.

I moved out of the way, into the living room, so that the paramedics could hurry him to the hospital. But I knew he was already gone. I don't even know why they rushed him out of the house, he wasn't moving, and he wasn't going to. They gave me false hope. Like at any minute they could blow puffs of air into his lungs and he would magically prop back up and smile at me. I'd never see him smile again or hear his laugh, that's what haunted me the most.

My father got into the ambulance first. He lifted grandma's frail body into the ambulance with them as they took off into the night towards the hospital. Mom and I sat on the couch as time slowly passed.

"He is going to be okay, Rachel. Everything is going to be okay," she said. But I knew that she was lying to me, I knew she didn't want to see me hurt. She turned the TV on to try to distract my mind and soothe me. I couldn't look at it. Her arm coiled around me and her red fingernails grazed my hair. She pulled me into the right side of her chest and I let my head fall back against her shoulder. Her lips pressed up against my forehead. I noticed sadness in her lip lines. Her eyes weren't full of life as usual. I knew she knew but she didn't give in. A few hours trudged by. It felt like days. The phone hadn't rung. What were they doing to him? Did they give up?

The TV right in front of me seemed like I was listening to muffled conversations from across the room. I couldn't focus on anything. I kept thinking that he was already

gone; all I needed was a phone call to confirm my crying. Mom still had her arm wrapped around me, lightly brushing my shoulder. I wanted to be strong for her, but somehow those sneaky tears kept dripping from my eyes for hours. She knew I was sad and I knew she was too, but we couldn't look each other in the eye. If we did, it would confirm all of our fears, and that was too real.

Finally, the phone rang. Mom ran to pick it up.

“Hello? Is he ok? What happened? Oh, oh no, I can't believe this! Ok take your time... Love you too.”

The phone clicked and her face peered outside the kitchen wall. My heart stopped, I knew she was going to deliver me the news I didn't want to hear.

“Who was that Mom? Is he ok? What happened?” millions of questions were going through my head.

“That was Grandma, she said that Grandpa had a stroke and collapsed in the kitchen...they tried everything they could, but he was already gone.” The words came at me in slow motion, each one slapping me in the face. They stung; I could tell it hurt her to say them.

I stayed collected, though. I didn't want to believe the news. I calmly walked myself to the bathroom and shut and locked the door behind me. Sitting on the edge of the bathtub with my face in my hands, I had to wonder if this was all a dream. Everything happened so suddenly, I couldn't be losing him, not so abruptly.

I looked in the mirror and realized that I would never see his face again...and that's when the emotions poured out of me. This was not normal crying, I was practically screaming, gasping for air. I couldn't stop. I paced the room while smiting God, asking him why he was yanked from my side.

"Rachel, sweetie, let me in please!" I could almost feel her motherly instinct through the door to hug me. I didn't want to let her in. I didn't want to be comforted. I just wanted him back. I knew this was going to be too much for me though. I unlocked the door and found mom standing there with her arms open. I threw myself into her and she wrapped her arms around me so tightly. We sat on the edge of the tub together. It felt like my tears could fill it to the brim, and then maybe I would have let myself drown my pain in them.

The silence we sat in for the next hour comforting each other, sitting on the edge, will be something that will always haunt me. In silence we find the answers. In silence we find our fears. In silence we find our strength. I swear he was there in that moment.

While sitting there, all of these moments I thought I couldn't recall came flooding back to me. One of my favorites was a Christmas time memory. It began when I was around five years old. He used to take me to this hall in Austintown where his Italian Club would meet. They would have Santa sitting on a stage with presents all around him. He would hold my small hand; his skin so rough and callused around my tiny soft fingers while waiting in line. He would always lift me up on Santa's lap and we would pose for a picture. Santa would hand me a present from the "girls" pile and clowns would hand me rainbow colored balloons as I walked off the stage. This is one of the earliest memories I

have of happiness. I remember smiling at him over the next couple years that we did this. It was one of those moments with him I treasure. I still have the picture of us that year sitting on my nightstand. I stare at it each morning as I rise.

I could see him clearly in my head, see every detail of his being, but the rest of my senses were dead. I couldn't smell his Old Spice aftershave or the smell of his freshly combed hair that he used to let me style. I couldn't smell the Marbolo Lights he'd light up so often every day. I couldn't see his big, dark eyes, the ones that swirled like galaxies, looking back at me. The worst though, was the loss of his sound.

I could almost hear him whispering his last good-bye to me. For a second, I forgot what his voice sounded like. I tried to replay moments in my head with him, tried to grasp at his sound once more, but it lingered briefly and I lost it. It's something I will later come to find, that you can't get back, no matter how hard you try.

Just then I heard the front door open and grandma and dad came walking up the steps.

Everyone had stuffy noses, blushed faces, and half opened eyes filled with dry tears. Grandma looked at me first and gave me a hug. As her frail body hugged me, it was like she was squeezing all of the tears out of me. I didn't know I had so many locked away in me, by now I thought I would have hit my quota, but they were uncontrollable at this point. Some of her tight black curls caressed my face as I nestled my nose into her shoulder. Dad was standing over her shoulder. He saw the tears leaking out of me and grabbed my right hand and squeezed away the pain.

She whispered into my ear, “He missed his little girl, Rachel.”

I looked at her puzzled and said, “You guys have been babysitting Abbey (my baby cousin) all week, what do you mean?”

“No, Rachel. Not Abbey. You were his little girl. He loved you more than anything.”

Dozens of cars were lined up, all going straight to the funeral home. Everyone walked in slowly, you could tell they wanted to turn back around and make a run for it. Tears practically poured from everyone's faces. I had never seen so many people hurt and upset over losing someone before. He was a hell of a guy, I knew that, but I never realized how many people's lives he had touched and affected.

They ushered us in first, the immediate family. We were supposed to say our good-byes and grieve in private before everyone else arrived. I found myself stuck in the door frame, completely frozen. His casket was about ten feet from me. It was a shiny grey color. It kind of reminded me of his old T-Bird. I think he would have enjoyed the irony of this. Flowers from friends and family were draped above and beside where he was laying. There was something eerily beautiful about him. I kept telling my feet to move forward, but it felt like I was standing in tar. Maybe if I didn't move I wouldn't have to say good-bye. Maybe if I turned around and walked straight back to the car it wouldn't be real. The line of family members behind me was forming and I knew I had to take that first step.

We entered the room, and there he was, lying perfectly in his casket. A black suit draped his body and his old brittle glasses covered his eyes. He was placed in there so delicately; he almost looked pleasant, like he was content with what had happened to him. For a second, I thought he was going to smile and sit upright and say this was all a joke. But I didn't laugh and he didn't move.

I stood a good distance away from him at first. It was creepy that he could lie there so beautifully and perfect, and yet have no life run through his veins. His body was still plump and round. I thought maybe when you died that they took your organs and everything inside of you out and he would look different, but it seemed like everything was still intact. His cheeks were still pudgy, his lips still full. His color wasn't great for obvious reasons. I wanted to touch him, but I also didn't want to touch him. For some reason I couldn't get the sound of Jell-O out of my head. You know when you suck a cube of Jell-o in between your teeth and it makes that "squish" sound before it hits the back of your throat? I thought his body would make that sound if I touched it, like his flesh would be stuck to his bones like that. So I didn't.

Grandma insisted that I be the first to say good-bye, but I didn't want that.

"Rachel, you are the oldest grand-daughter, why don't you say good-bye to him first," she said. But I couldn't move, or maybe I just didn't want to. If I said those words to him, simply said, "Good-bye grandpa, I love you," it would be too real, that would mean it was over with and I wasn't ready for that. But she gave me a little nudge forward towards him, and I had to face reality.

One foot in front of the other towards the casket; my pulse was growing louder in my ears with each inch I crept. I was literally five feet away from him, but it seemed like miles were between us. He looked a bit scary up close. His eyes were too tightly closed. Even if he wanted to wake up again, I don't think they would move. His lips were an awful fleshy pink color (I can tell they used the wrong shade of make-up on him). His strands were combed perfectly into place (which was something I didn't see much from

him). It looked like they put in a lot of work. I felt like I was in some weird funky wax museum, where I knew it was him but they strategically messed up a few things to confuse me. My brain knew it was him, it at least registered that, but this all seemed like a big magic trick. I got over my fear and placed my hand on his. Surprisingly, it was smooth. It was like they buffed his skin over. None of his skin was pinched up or represented a dehydrated hand. His dark veins were not present. It was like everything that made him old, all his imperfections, were wiped away.

I tried to get the words out, but my shaky lip kept me from delivering them. Blinded by my tears, I whispered “I love you,” and I quickly escaped towards the restroom. I made it in the stall just in time. The room was spinning and I let myself fall against the wall and hit the floor. I couldn’t handle it, I couldn’t catch my breath.

I let the tears fall down my cheeks, tiny daggers each stinging my heart and skin. I let myself take it all in, this was not a time to look pretty or be strong, this was a time to say good-bye and let the hurt wash over me. My younger cousins came banging on the door to check on me, but I hurried them away. I needed to be alone. I needed to let this consume me. After about a half hour of calming myself down, I went back out to surround myself with family.

Some of my close friends showed up to support me. They sat with me and told me how sorry they were for my loss, but I couldn’t really pay attention to much else they were saying. They saw the tear stains on my face, but they didn’t know how empty and alone I was on the inside. They didn’t know that while they were offering distractions to get my mind off of it, that my mind lost the balance it once held.

My thoughts began to shift, *so this is what the real world is like*, I've been lied to. My eyes opened a little wider, and I realized that bad things happen to good people; *that the world was not fair*. This was the moment I realized, I wasn't going to be the same me anymore; that I still have my beliefs, but now they are mixed in with the pessimistic emotions that his death has caused me. I felt my thoughts and energy change that day, especially when we got back in the car the next morning to go to the cemetery.

The thought of him no longer by my side was heartbreaking, but having to bury his body deep underground, where I could never get to him, was unthinkable. It finally sank in. He wouldn't be sitting in his plush, green recliner anymore watching old re-runs of JAG. He wouldn't be there to go swimming with me in the middle of summer, or to play cards with when the rain would ruin our day. He wouldn't be waiting for me to come over from school, to ask him questions about my homework. He was taken from me, all of my memories forced to play a slideshow stuck on repeat; we would no longer be creating any new moments together.

#

I lost him the summer right before high school started, right when my life needed him the most. Being a teenager is never easy, but it didn't help me that I was still grieving when I entered high school. I was always insecure about the way I looked and the confidence in myself, pretty much since I was little; but now depression was sinking in and it felt like the next four years would be torture.

Once he died, I stopped sleeping, my mind was moving a mile a minute and it wouldn't shut off. I began to worry about the small stuff and the feeling of anxiety met my stomach for the first time. I never used to worry, I never used to think bad instances were going to happen; but that's all my mind could focus on.

I stopped eating for about the first three months after his passing. The thought of food made me sick. I was causing myself stomach pain, hoping my real pain would go away. I started not to care about anything anymore. All I wanted to do was sleep and curl up in my bed, where nothing bad could happen to me. Over the course of a month and a half I lost thirty-five pounds, clothes were hanging off me. I became skinnier and received compliments, but that didn't make me feel good, it wasn't what I wanted. I just wanted him back, I knew that not eating wasn't going to change his death, but I didn't care to live my life anymore without him.

My grades started slipping in school and I started missing class because I didn't "feel well." I isolated myself from my friends and family. I wasn't having fun and didn't care to; I didn't want to create new memories or grow closer to anyone. I stopped talking

to my parents about my life, I stopped visiting grandma for a while because it was too hard, and I closed everyone out of my little bubble. I thought if I opened up to someone, that they would be ripped from my side again, and I simply couldn't bear that loss again.

#

I'm not an unhappy person; I'm just stuck in the personality of one. For the half of my life, that or for which, I've been depressed. I've lost my energy and my smile. My whole family witnessed it and I don't know how to transition back into the world I used to know.

I'm pessimistic about my life, about love, and about my family. I still find it hard to talk to my parents. They look at me like I'm some sort of zombie that just goes to school and work and then goes straight to bed. I have so much I could say to them, but I don't. I've sealed myself shut to them and the rest of my family. Yeah, sure, I have my good days where I'll let them in a little and open up to them. But I am still scared to laugh in front of them, what a crime it would be to let them catch a glimpse of my smile.

Even the friends that do witness my once-in-a-while smile see that it's not the same. It doesn't shine as brightly anymore and it doesn't linger any longer. The frown lines have been permanently etched around my mouth. I don't always frown, but I don't always smile either. He was the light in my life, the piece in my life that knew true happiness. But now that light is buried down deep inside of me with the suppressed emotions that I only sometimes explore. I still haven't figured out how to piece together that shattered mess of the fourteen-year-old girl that I used to be.

No one wants to talk about him; I think it still stings to say his name. I still have a hard time going over Grandma's for holidays or even to visit. I start to think about holidays with him, or I look at Grandma and wonder how much time I have left with her. When I lost him, I lost my sense of self and hope. It's like they all got buried together. The grieving process still isn't over. I know that he will always be in my heart; it's just a matter of time of putting all the pieces back together.

A part of me disappeared with him. Have you found me yet?

No Rachel, I haven't.

...

The search continues.

I had to come see you today. I thought it would get easier over the years to come sit with you, but it's actually gotten harder. The dirt has hardened and the grass has grown over you. I had my chance to get to you when the dirt was barely settled and I unfortunately didn't take it. There was a time where I would have crawled in there next to you and said good-bye to it all. Sometimes I regret not doing that. I had to come see you today to tell you my secrets. I want you to see who I am without you.

Grandpa, if you can hear me, please know this:

Your grave is always surrounded by flowers and small token decorations for the holidays. The family still stops by once in a while, but I seem to be the only one to always remember the anniversary of your death. It has been a little easier to move on the last couple of years, trying to finally leave the grieving stage behind, but every time I come here I still cry like I did the day you were taken from me. I can't believe it's been fourteen years. I stood here, above you, as a lost teenager, and now I stand here as a lost woman.

My life has been empty without you. The family is still the same old family, but your ghost always haunts us, especially during the holidays. You aren't there to carve the turkey and watch the football games on Thanksgiving. You aren't there to tease me with presents on Christmas Eve, and I definitely miss that you aren't there to take silly pictures of me when I wasn't looking, during my birthday dinners.

My life has been altered drastically without you. I miss you so much during those times, wishing you weren't grabbed from my side as early as you were. What kills me the most is that you weren't there for some of my special days and won't be there for the ones

that come in the future. Grandma always tells me how proud you would be of me. She cried during my graduation (all 3 of them). I wish you could have been there for my big moments. You won't be there when I get married or have kids, but I know I'll talk to them non-stop about you. I love you, I haven't stopped. I just wish I would have had the chance to hug you and tell you that one last time.

I needed to say those things to you. I needed you to hear those words from me, but now I need you to hear and see the hell that I got stuck in. The one that I can't seem to redeem myself in. I don't blame you for what happened to me. I could never do that. But sometimes I wonder if I would have still gone through the mess if you hadn't left me so suddenly.

When the Monster Took Over

Grandpa, listen...

It happened fourteen years ago...the monster finally consumed me. It preyed on me at my weakest moment. I could feel its teeth sinking in and holding on for dear life. It made sense for it to target me at this point in my life. I had just lost someone I loved. I was grieving; but fourteen years later the bite marks are still fresh and the wound is still throbbing. Sure, at times, it loosened its grip and let my scar breathe. It was like it was giving me a glimpse of hope; a moment of inspiration, but just as I'd catch my breath, it would beat it back out of my again.

Though overpowering and overbearing to my life, my monster is invisible. Close friends and family members can see the battle I go through on a daily basis; but new friends and acquaintances will probably not see the setbacks of my struggle. To most, it just seems like I've changed, possibly even become boring or sad, but what they don't know is that I've lost myself. Chronic depression, bipolar tendencies, and severe anxiety has taken away my childhood, my teenage years, and is slowly consuming the rest of my twenties. It all started the summer before entering high school, you tragically passed away.

I remember the incident like it was yesterday. Unfortunately, these images are not something that I can shake so easily from my mind. It was August 2, 2002 around 3 A.M. when I got a gut-wrenching feeling that something wasn't right. You knew how close I was to you and grandma. You both were my second home. You and grandma lived only five minutes down the street from my home and I was usually over there every day after school. It was my safe place. There were so many memories that their house encompassed for me.

I used to sit on the couch, with you sitting in your chair, watching Wheel of Fortune, Jeopardy, and old JAG re-runs. We'd eat dinner together at the table, have tickle fights on the floor, and play in the swimming pool together on those hot summer days. Besides my father, you were someone I truly admired and looked up to as my hero. I saw a lot of myself in you. You were short and husky (how I spent most of my adolescences, though I am still short) with a balding hairline and coke bottle glasses. You always loved to make people laugh and were always so giving of others (two qualities of yours that I believe I possess).

When I abruptly woke in the middle of that night, I knew you needed me. Shortly after, the phone rang and grandma stated that you had collapsed on the kitchen floor. My heart instantly sank. We rushed over there and I remember seeing five or six paramedics rushing anxiously up the front steps to you. It was all a blur after that. Colors blended together, the sirens of the ambulance went on mute. I felt the world stop spinning, just briefly. All I remember is your body being rushed past me to the ambulance, as my heart beat erupted through my ears. I knew you were already gone. Your body was limp, grey, and lifeless when we arrived. You needed a miracle, but I knew that wouldn't happen. The man I loved died alone on the kitchen floor, and I didn't get to say good-bye to him.

As soon as they got to the hospital they pronounced you dead. Mom sat next to me, stroking my hair, but I couldn't hold it in anymore. I ran to the bathroom and locked myself in. I remember sitting on the edge of the bathtub, digging my nails into the ends of the tub, clutching so strongly it hurt my knuckles. The tears poured out instantaneously. Minutes went by as I fell to the ground screaming. This was my first heartbreak. Mom

rushed in and pulled me up off of the ground and wrapped me in her arms. This is the day I knew I would never be the same.

The next few weeks inched by slowly. I still cried at night for your loss. I was still mending my broken heart. If only I could have warned myself for the years of heartache I now know would follow.

I started high school that fall. A time when I should have been vibrant, had fun, been a kid, ended up being a waste of four years of my life. The first few months into school, something happened to me. My hair was falling out in chunks, I stopped eating and lost thirty-five pounds in two and a half months, I wasn't sleeping, and I became quiet and isolated myself from everyone. My parents started to worry about me and had me go to a bunch of different doctors. Endless tests were run, countless appointments were made, but most of them gave one conclusion: I was experiencing depression.

This was all surreal to me. I had always been a cheerful, talkative child. What was happening to me? Before you died, I was always optimistic about things. I allowed myself to dream, to have hope in things. Now everything was covered in darkness. My hope fizzled out like a firecracker. Pessimistic and dreary thoughts consumed my every waking minute. How do I make this stop?

Mom suggested I talk to a psychiatrist and be put on medication to help. I was scared. I never needed any pills to make me happy or solve my problems, especially not at fifteen. I thought it was normal to grieve, to miss someone, but apparently if it goes on for a while, it becomes overwhelming.

I saw a psychiatrist and began talking to a therapist. It was unpleasant and uncomfortable to talk to a complete stranger, but I knew I had to get better. They gave me

a 'magic' pill to help ease my pain. After a few weeks, I could feel my body ease a bit, but the lingering dark thoughts never seemed to go away. I kept taking the pills though, hoping eventually things would change...but they never did. I gave up. I stopped taking them and stopped going to therapy. I thought it was something that I could handle on my own.

So for a few years, I refused help and simply lived with it. I felt myself slowly being pulled into a bottomless mud pit of depression. One day I woke up and didn't recognize the girl staring back at me. I lost me. I still haven't found her. I thought I would get better overnight with the pills, but here I am fourteen years later still being tossed back and forth like a ping-pong ball to therapists and psychiatrists. The fact that I went cold turkey with nothing for a few years really didn't help my case, but no one called me out on my sadness, so I didn't budge.

I found myself craving isolation. I didn't want to be around my parents or friends. I didn't want to go to parties or school dances. I didn't want my boyfriend to touch me or my parents to hug me. Someone else's embrace on my body felt like it was burning my flesh. I hated it. I didn't want to be close to anybody, not after the tragic loss I suffered. Depression followed me all throughout high school. It roamed the lonely hallways with me. It lurked in the dark corners of the building.

I thought I could battle it on my own, but it turns out it's more powerful than I thought. I started to think that being unhappy was just part of my personality. Simple things didn't bring any pleasure to my life. I walked around school with a straight face. Smiling felt odd and unfamiliar to my face. I felt myself disappearing. I tried to talk to

my friends and boyfriend about it, but they couldn't understand it. I get it, I didn't understand it either, and I still don't.

It's funny and sad to think that one event in my life, losing my grandpa, could trigger this major shift in my personality and life. Even after all of these years the depression still haunts me on a daily basis. I've learned to deal with you not being here anymore, I've even learned how to hide my secrets and sadness after all this time, but the depression still envelops my personality and thoughts.

Losing you and a part of me in high school is only one instance of how this disease has altered my life. I do not experience joy like other people do; actually I do not experience joy at all. Sure, sometimes I smile and laugh, but only for a second and then it all disappears again.

I hold myself back from doing things and finding myself. It feels like all of my dreams and ambitions are right in front of me, but a brick wall is standing in my way. Every day is a constant battle to get out of bed and get dressed. My thoughts are never consistent; I battle myself back and forth over easy decisions.

I feel so numb yet so emotional at the same time. I am a walking contradiction. I just feel lost. My mind races a mile a minute. Anxiety attacks remind me it's all too real. I've been on and off medications throughout the years. Some were a little helpful, some made me worse, but nothing has fully taken the sadness away.

This past year though, at twenty-eight years old, I've finally decided to go seek help again. I put myself back in therapy. I've finally found a psychiatrist that I trust and that listens to me instead of blaming me for what is happening to me. It's hard to admit that you're not happy and that you need help. I've just had enough. I've lost my young

years to this disease and I don't want to lose the better years of my life to it. I'm scared to see where things are going to go, but I know I have to track through the mud to get to a better place in my life.

Some people will say that I'm a normal person, that I'm okay, but it's only because I've gotten so good at hiding my illness. I don't want to hide it anymore, it's not something I'm ashamed of, and it's not something that I can control. I want to start living my life as a happier person.

Though depression has beaten me down over the years, I've still kept this thriving ambition inside me to get better and reach my goals. I know it can take months on end to find a treatment that will work for me, but I have faith in my doctors and in myself, that I will succeed in finally finding myself again.

Do you understand now? Do you get how much I miss you? Do you see how completely lost I am without you on this Earth? I hope you can still see me from Heaven. I hope at times you can even be around me and protect me, but if you do have any real give and take with the man upstairs, can you please make this stop already? I've grieved and said my good-byes, so why is it this monster still lives on? I've tried to kill it numerous times, but it just ends up killing me. I've come to terms that your life is over and you aren't coming back, but I still can. Help me find me again. Help me find your little girl that disappeared so long ago.

Still a Right to Panic

I remember this one time, my mom and I were taking our golden retriever Sammy around our neighborhood block one summer. I was maybe seven years old. I had this great purple sparkly bike with neon handles. I liked to ride a little ahead of them, I guess to show my independence. I cut the corner of one of the blocks and was no longer in my mother's sight. An older couple was weeding out front and had their little Pomeranian outside with them. She was a mix of chestnut and hazelnut colors. I remember her running towards me, I thought in excitement, but turned out to be anger. I pedaled quickly to get away from her. I looked back to make sure she wasn't chasing me anymore, but when I did I hit a huge bump in the cement and my left handlebar jabbed me right under my rib cage and knocked the wind out of me. I collapsed onto the ground. I couldn't catch my breath and I could already feel a bruise forming on my small chest.

Sammy and mom were just rounding the corner. She rushed to my side. The older couple took hold of Sammy and my precious bike as my mom swept me into her arms and carried me all the way back to the house.

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When my family doctor first said the word "depression" to me, I thought it was a joke. I'm just a kid, what did I have to be sad about? I was just entering high school; this should be the best time of my life. The haunting feeling of getting the wind kicked out of me came flooding back, but this time there was no one to pick me up. There was no one to carry me back home.

Our doctor told me he wanted me to see a psychiatrist in the area for help. A part of me didn't respond to this. *I can handle this on my own.* My grandpa just died; it was

normal to grieve. I didn't see what the big deal was. I didn't want to see a doctor. I didn't want to say the words, "I'm sad" aloud to someone, especially not a stranger. What a weird situation. Who ever thought it was a good idea to pour out your problems to a complete stranger? They don't know me, and they certainly wouldn't after a few short visits.

The day mom took me to this new psychiatrist the sun was just starting to set (His office had late hours). The crisp air of the fall was just arriving. That was my favorite time of the year. I thought maybe this was a good sign. I thought maybe that would mean this visit would be quick, that maybe someone could crack my personality and solve my problems right away and this would be over with. I didn't think over a decade later we would still be in the same predicament.

I hated small talk, but of course that's what mom insisted on in the car. We hadn't talked much lately. I hadn't talked much to anyone lately, and honestly, it felt good not to. We buckled our seat belts and got ready for the twenty-five minute drive ahead of us.

"So, Rachel, are you nervous?" her hands clutched the steering wheel as she turned out of the driveway.

"What do I have to be nervous about? I just don't really see the point of this?" my arms were crossed against my chest. My eyes were focused over my shoulder as I viewed the world outside of the window.

"You don't think anything is wrong with you?" I could hear a pinch of concern in her voice.

“I mean, I don’t know...I think it’s just normal to miss someone. I don’t understand why I’m being punished for grieving.” God, I hated talking about this. I just wanted to crawl back into my bed and disappear.

“You think you’re being punished? Really? You think it’s okay that you’ve lost all this weight, stopped sleeping, and completely shut us out?” she looked over at me as we came to a halt at a red light.

“I didn’t say it was okay. I just think I’m having a hard time with all of this. I think it will pass.” She reached over and squeezed my shoulder.

“Just promise me you’ll tell the doctor all of this stuff, okay? Let’s let him be the decider of all of this.” She must really be concerned. Maybe there was something wrong with me.

“Okay, mom. I will, I promise.” Words weren’t really spoken the rest of the ride. The radio was on a light hum. I could feel her looking over at me every few minutes. Why was she so worried? It wasn’t like I was dying or something.

We pulled into the driveway of the office. The building was white brick with glass windows. It looked nice enough. I told my mom I would give her a call when I was done. I stepped out of the white Grand Prix. She gave me a smile of hope as I headed in.

“Rachel, are you sure you don’t want me to come with you?”

“That’s okay, mom. I think I want to just be alone for this.” I took a deep breath as I shut the car door and walked towards the front of the building.

While walking towards the door to enter, I was supposed to press a button to allow the nurse’s to unlock the door for me, but when I grabbed the handle, it was already

unlocked. It is like they were just waiting for me to walk through. *Maybe that's a good sign; maybe I'll get the answers tonight I've been patiently waiting for.*

Green, the color of envy or a signal to press down on the gas pedal of your car; the color I would later come to find represents freedom. That was the color that first greeted me on this visit to the doctor's office.

Doctors' offices are usually cold and bland; a place where you sit in a hard, uncomfortable chair and flip through dozens of old magazines to pass the time, but this one seemed unlike the rest. *Maybe he'll be different than the others.*

Warm comfy chairs were placed all over the room, a coffee station was provided to feed your thirst after hours of waiting, and a light buzz of classical music filled my eardrums. *If they think that music is going to ease me mind, they are sadly mistaken, I'm going to need something a little stronger than that.*

I walked myself up to the nurse's station. A short woman with a dark tight perm sat behind the window. Her eyes met mine immediately. "Hey there, Can I have your name please?"

"Rachel, Rachel Taylor. I'm here to see Dr. Perry."

"Okay, great Rachel. I've got you checked in. I need you to fill out some paperwork for me since this is your first time here. Also, can I have your mom's insurance card so that I can make a copy?" I handed my mom's laminated card over to her. "Thanks, you can have a seat. Just bring those back up to me when you are finished with them."

The waiting room was pretty huge. There were seats positioned in front of the nurse's station in a square formation. There was also a little hallway along the side that

led back to another waiting room with the same formation. I decided to sit back there. I didn't want people's judgy eyes on me. I started to fill out the short stack of papers on my clipboard.

Age: 14

Is this your first visit: yes (and hopefully the last)

What is your reason for coming today: my doctor said I was depressed (but actually I have no idea)

Please tell me what symptoms you are having: trouble sleeping (because I keep seeing his dead, lifeless body in my dreams), loss of appetite (extreme weight loss), hair loss, and sadness (heartbreak).

The rest was just boring medical stuff; the usual. I walked back up to the window and tapped on the glass. She was on the phone. I mouthed the words "I'm done" to her and handed her my clipboard as she slid the glass aside. She mouthed back, "Have a seat." I moved myself to the section in front of her station.

I positioned myself, coffee in hand, across from the nurse's window, right in front of the doors I entered through. I could see that inside their little cubicle there was a TV monitor placed above the nurses' heads to see when people were approaching the office. A few patients shuffled towards the door the first hour I was waiting, but realized when they latched onto the handle it was locked. *The button is right in front of your faces people, don't you see it glowing?*

The nurses didn't speak to them though or give them direction; they just stared blankly at the monitor waiting for the patients to slowly figure it out. *This wouldn't be the first time they didn't offer much help.* People began knocking on the window and making

squinting eyes in the dark, trying to find some way to get in. Finally they would see the button and enter with embarrassment. *If you thought it was hard to get in, just wait until you try to get out.*

I sat there with my fingers tapping and leg anxiously twitching up and down. I was already sick of doctors. I saw my family doctor a handful of times the last month for check-ups and referral appointments. They also recommended a therapist for me to start seeing as well. Besides telling me I was depressed, I didn't seem to get anymore answers than that. *Don't expect any answers this time either, Rachel. They probably won't tell you a damn thing.*

My parents seemed so worried the last few weeks. I've never seen them so concerned about something with me. They made it seem like what I was going through was life or death. *Am I dying? Is it Cancer? Nobody seemed to have those answers.* Crazy death sentences I'd given myself danced around in my head.

The last few weeks have been rough. I couldn't find a belt to hold up the bagginess of my pants, my cheekbones were protruding against my skin; strands of hair filled my hands anytime I touched my head. They tested my thyroid, they sent me to an endocrinologist, to a well-known clinic for tests, but they all seemed stumped. I hope this guy has some answers for me, they promised me he would, that he was the best.

Names were called out, none of which sounded remotely like mine. It seemed like I was destined to wait here forever. It's been almost two hours. I sat there wishing I had brought homework or something to occupy my time with so I would not dwell on the situation. I looked around for a magazine to read, but just as I was about to leave my seat

and peruse, I saw a woman was trapped in between the two doors, not knowing how to exit the office. *This looks promising.*

She wasn't the only one having difficulty escaping, but it definitely took her longer than the others. The answer was right in front of her face, a large glowing green button to push and exit, but somehow it was overlooked by everyone. *I finally had the answers for once, just not for my own problems.*

The woman scurried back and forth between doors trying to see if any of them would unlock, but no such luck. The first set of doors she exited through were still unlocked; she very easily could have come back inside and asked for help, but she didn't, just like the rest. *I swear these people are like lab rats trapped in an endless maze with no sense of direction.* Finally, the woman looked back at me through the glass and I directed my finger towards the button right beside her. She looked at me, her face slightly blushing; you could tell she felt silly for not seeing the shiny button glowing in her face. She gave me a nod and was on her way. *Lucky.*

I turned back to the selection of magazines. Everything was geared towards older people. I pulled out my phone instead. This was before the days of *Facebook, Instagram, and Pinterest.* *Dear God, how did we ever get by?* I opened Internet Explorer and typed in the word "depression". The first thing that popped up was an article entitled, "Am I Depressed?" I clicked on it.

Do you feel sad for no reason or aren't sure why? Has all your motivation gone out of the window? Any changes in weight? Lack of interest in activities you once enjoyed? If you answered yes to any of these questions,

then you might be suffering from depression. Depression can occur at a young age and can often happen for no reason at all.

As I kept reading the article, things started to click. I did have these symptoms. Yes, I was grieving, but I guess this wasn't a normal part of it. My fingers began to itch the inside pocket of my jeans. My hands were clammy. My fingers started clicking back and forth against my thumb. It was a nervous tic I developed when everything started to change. It soothed me. I didn't want anything to be wrong with me. I don't want anyone to think I'm broken or need fixed. The door to the back rooms opened into the waiting room.

After about three hours of waiting, *something I learned would be a typical time of waiting in his office*, I finally heard my name being called, and was taken through another set of doors to wait in a lonely room by myself. A nurse named Shelly came into the room to take my vitals. More small talk followed.

"Hey, Rachel, how are you doing tonight?" she seemed sincere in asking.

"I guess I'm okay."

"Can you roll up your sleeve of your sweatshirt so that I can take your blood pressure please?" she slid the cuff up my left arm and gave it five pumps. Normal. Good.

"What has been going on with you Rachel?" Here we go again.

"Well, my family doctor thinks I'm depressed and wanted me to see someone."

My feet dangled off of the chair I was boosted up on. I didn't look at her when I spoke.

"Was there something that possibly triggered this or did you just not feel right one day?" Her pen was ready to scribble down my answers.

“My grandpa just recently passed. I thought maybe this was just the grieving process, but I guess not.” I began rubbing my fingers again. My stomach felt like it was sinking in quicksand.

“I’m sorry to hear that, Rachel, that had to be hard for you.” She stopped writing and gave me a look of sympathy.

“Thanks.” I looked her in the eye when I said it so she would know I meant it.

“The doctor is a little behind right now, but he should be in shortly, okay?”

“Okay, thank you.” She closed my chart and exited the room closing the door behind her.

They told me the doctor would be with me shortly, but we have heard that lie before. I sat there with my phone, trying not to play on the internet or look up any more horrifying answers. *WebMD was no longer my friend; no longer there to comfort me or answer my questions-in reality, it just wanted to feed off of scaring the living shit out of me.*

Thirty minutes went by and it seemed like the doctor had forgotten about me. My anxiety seemed to get the best of me at this point; endless possibilities went through my head of what he was going to tell me.

I then heard mumbled talking outside of the door and I heard my chart being grabbed out of the holder. My breathing got heavier as I saw the door handle turn. The panic set in. What was he going to tell me? I trusted this man to make me feel okay, but his month long waiting list wasn’t very reassuring. Do you know how many things go through a paranoid girl’s mind in a month? *Maybe he would finally give me the answers I*

wanted; maybe the answers I didn't want .I just wanted answers. I needed them. I quickly shot my mom a text to let her know he was finally seeing me. She wasn't too far away.

He walked in and my heart stopped mid-beat. All the things I feared were going to be addressed within the next few minutes.

“Hi Rachel, how are we doing tonight?” he had a white lab coat on that covered down to the knees of his grey slacks. His thick black hair was combed back neatly. His green eyes were piercing when he spoke. His teeth were a little crooked, but his smile made up for that. He shook my hand and had a seat on his stool. He seemed sincere enough. This might work out after all.

“I'm doing okay. Thanks.”

“Do you mind if I just do a quick examination to make sure your health is okay.” He reached for his stethoscope draped around his neck.

“Sure, that's fine.” I sat up tall on the seat. He listened to my heartbeat. I took four deep breaths in and out. His fingers lingered around my neck to check my lymph nodes. He had me lay down and pressed on my stomach a few times. “Did any of that hurt?” I shook my head no. He grabbed my right hand and helped me sit back up.

“Everything seems normal, Rachel. So what's been going on with you? Your chart says symptoms of depression.” He glanced over the chart, his eyes speed reading from left to right.

“Yeah, I guess that's what's going on. My family doctor and my parents seem to have some concern about me.”

“Are you feeling different lately? Can you tell me what you've noticed?” his voice was soft when he spoke. It was nice that someone seemed to want to listen.

“Well, my grandpa passed away a few months ago. I’ve just been having a hard time processing that I guess. I haven’t really been sleeping well. I haven’t had much of an appetite. My parents think I’m withdrawing from things and not talking very much. I’ve also been losing a lot of hair in the shower.” It felt kind of refreshing to say these things to someone, but it also felt kind of terrifying. Admitting it made it feel all too real.

“Rachel, I think what you are experiencing is depression, which I feel is normal with your situation. Do you understand what that means?” I did and I didn’t.

“I read a little bit about it, but I guess I don’t really understand what’s going on.” I felt embarrassed for not understanding my own mind and body. I felt ashamed for not being able to control myself.

“Well, sometimes traumatic events can trigger this in people and sometimes it is a chemical imbalance. I’m glad you came in today, so that we can treat it right away before it gets worse.” Well that sounded hopeful. I guess this would be all over soon after all.

“Let me give you some pamphlets on it so you can better understand what’s going on. If you have any questions after you read these, don’t hesitate to call the office and speak to me.” It was nice to know someone was here if I needed them. He walked out in the hallway to retrieve the information. I guess this didn’t have to be a scary thing after all. This could be a simple situation, this could all get resolved in the next few months.

He came back with the materials and went over them a little bit with me.

“Rachel, do you think you’d like to be on medication to make you feel better? I know this can be a rough thing to experience.”

I'd never really taken medication long-term for anything before. He could tell I was a little hesitant on it. "Yeah...I suppose we could try something, right?" "What harm could it do?"

"I am going to put you on 150 mg of Wellbutrin. A lot of my patients react really well to this and you shouldn't notice too many side effects, but if you do or it makes you feel worse, you call back here right away."

I nodded 'okay'. He wrote out the script and placed it in my hand. My mind began drifting a bit as to what it all meant. He asked me if I was seeing a therapist. I told him I had an appointment set up with one. He seemed pleased about that. I guess medication didn't always do the trick, I needed to deal with my feelings as well.

"I want to see you back in two weeks, Rachel. I want to make sure this is going to work for you." He shook my hand and gave me a pat on the back and sent me out to schedule another appointment.

"You take care of yourself, okay?"

"Yes, thank you." He gave me a smile before the door closed on me out in the waiting room. I set up my appointment two weeks out. The nurse handed me a reminder card and I slipped it into my pocket.

He at least gave me some answers. Other patients left with scripts in hand and peace of mind. I at least had that for now, too. I didn't know this would just be the beginning of it. I didn't know that the medication prescribed wouldn't be the winner. I didn't know doctors would become assholes. I had to be the girl with complexities.

I pushed through the first door and saw the glowing green button calling my name. I slammed my palm against it and the door opened swiftly to show me the parking lot. I was free for now. My lungs began to fill again. My breath was returning.

Undisclosed Information

Patient name: Rachel Taylor

Age: 28 (still in the same predicament)

Prognosis:

Patient presents with irritable depression symptoms and intense anxiety symptoms.

They didn't tell me much about depression, just that I had it. Thank God I'm smart enough to look things up on the computer, read articles and books, and do my research. I've been screwed over by too many doctors and put on the wrong medication too many times not to be educated about my illness.

Depression is debilitating in itself, but having anxiety with it really fucks you up. Yeah, sometimes they share some of the same symptoms, but having a mix of them is some sort of twisted nightmare that I wouldn't wish on my worst enemy. There are moments that I care about everything, every little detail, and then there are moments I want to run from it all.

WebMD and printed text don't provide all the answers, but they certainly have given me more than my doctor's have.

What is depression?

Many people have felt sad or depressed at times. Feeling depressed can be a normal reaction to loss, life's struggles, or injured self-esteem.

Sometimes people have feelings of intense sadness-moments of helplessness, hopelessness, and feeling worthless. These symptoms can last for many days or weeks and can stop normal functioning. It could be something more than sadness-it could be clinical depression- a treatable medical condition.

Mush

They don't tell you about the extreme memory loss. I think maybe they were scared to. I noticed it almost immediately. You know the sound your fork makes when you slide it into Jell-o or stiff mashed potatoes? I imagined that's what my brain would sound like if you poked it. It was turning to mush. I used to be able to memorize birthdays (I was my mom's rolodex), phone numbers, addresses, names...but now I can't hold onto my age, my cell phone number, or basic names of specials at the diner.

It has been especially hard with school. I knew going back to school would be a challenge, but it seems like every night in class I lose focus in the empty white boards or start to watch the snow fall down through the giant bay window on the back wall of the room. My professors and peers mouths move like puppets on mute. Their mouths move in eloquent ways, but their words seem to lightly tap my face like fallen snowflakes, but in an instant they are gone. Nothing sticks.

Sometimes when I am making love to Bryan (the new man tangled in my web), I want to call him Chris or Jesse. I don't mean to and I know that it is him, but my mind seems to blur the lines of my past and what's currently going on. I have memories of time spent with different lovers, but sometimes I can't recall who I shared certain moments with. I'll see something when we are walking through the mall and ask Bryan about it and he looks at me like I'm crazy. I guess it wasn't him I created those memories with. My brain has no clue which man it was, which is awful, because there haven't been many.

I can have a full blown conversation about my day with my mother or my friends in class and five minutes later I have no idea what we just discussed. I live with constant

Déjà vu. It feels like I am stuck in a fog. It feels like someone has their finger shifting between play and rewind on the controller of my mind. I am stuck in that awkward space before you fall asleep. Your body is lifeless, but you can hear what's going on around you. I hate that feeling.

My calendar on my phone has become a go-to lifesaver. I write in all of my appointments, shifts at work, and socializing times in there. I would probably go crazy if I didn't. If I have more than one thing going on in a day my mind begins to wind up like a tornado. I have to get it down and out of my head. I started to carry a small notebook in my purse to jot down anything that consumes my mind. *Don't forget this, I can't forget this.* I also have a daily organizer placed on my desk to look at each morning. I like to look at what I have going on for the week. It helps me breathe. It helps keep my mind intact. Such simple necessities, but my mind would be a shit-show without them.

Sometimes I wake up from a shitty night's sleep and can't seem to figure out if my dreams were real or not. Even the ghosts of my nightmares seem to haunt me in real life. I feel like by the time I'm thirty half of my brain will be like the mush I mentioned before.

Yesterday at work, I couldn't even think of what parsley was called while garnishing a plate of food; something I have been familiar with my last twelve years at the diner. It feels like Alzheimer's is already setting in.

That sounds horrible to say and I wish things weren't like that. I already have a constant fear now that in due time I won't be able to remember anything anymore. I already have a hard time deciphering dreams from reality. What if I forget Bryan? What if my memories are slowly wiped away? I mean let's face it, I'm already losing myself.

Lack of Sleep (Pattern)

The nights are the hardest. I'm exhausted all day, but when the lights go off and the darkness consumes me, my mind becomes wired. The anxiety stretches from its slumber and rises like an angry beast inside me. Three shots of espresso and bolts of lightning feel like they are coursing through my veins. My body shakes involuntarily. I try to crawl under the covers and pretend Bryan's arms are around me, but even the thought of his hug cannot calm my body.

I basically haven't had a good night's sleep since this all started fourteen years ago. I seem to need the opposite of what everyone else does. My body wants to stay in bed all day. The aches and pains even linger with me when my body has shut down. They tell you that a "normal" person needs a solid seven or eight hours of sleep a night. They should know by now that I am nowhere close to normal.

I usually only need three or four hours of sleep to function, but I'm lucky if I get that. If I ever get more than six hours (which usually only happens if I'm hopped up on Zzzquil), I am totally screwed. My brain has its own bedtime, which is usually around 1:30 in the morning on a good day. Usually at around eleven or so I get a strange energy spurt and the thoughts begin to dance in every direction in my mind.

They didn't warn me that I would never be able to be comfortable again. It's like having a crick in your neck you can't seem to rub out. I was always a sound sleeper, even as a kid. I could have slept through a heavy metal concert if you'd let me; but now I can hear my neighbors three blocks over snoring in their beds.

Over the years I've learned to live with this. I have tried almost every sleeping pill in the book and nothing has worked. In fact, I had the opposite reaction to almost everything I was on. A few years back they had me try every type of sleeping pill imaginable. This went on for over six months. Every two or three weeks a new pill was meeting my system and every couple of weeks we would come to find that my body didn't like them very much.

There was one that actually put me to sleep, but I woke up with a splitting migraine. I had never suffered from one before. I asked my dad to shut my door so that I could be in complete darkness. Breathing was a hassle. Every time my body moved even a centimeter it felt like a hammer was cracking into my skull. I couldn't move. I wanted to cry, but it hurt for me to even let the tears out. That was the day of my best friend's eighteenth birthday party and I missed it. I stayed in bed the whole day clutching my eyes shut and praying it would dissipate. I would never be taking that again.

Ambien was the worst though. It is child's play for me. Half of a pill would knock a normal person out, but not me. I took two whole pills one night and I felt like I just guzzled two large pots of coffee...never again will I take that shit.

I was bouncing through the roof that night. I couldn't get to bed, so I ended up playing on my computer before eventually falling asleep about four hours later. Little did I know, the best was yet to come. When I woke up the next morning, I was missing \$110 from my bank account and had an e-mail confirmation that I had just purchased two tickets to go see Carrie Underwood in concert in a completely different state. Yeah, so my mom told me I wasn't allowed to take that again unless I gave her my cell phone and

laptop before bed. I told my doctor about what happened and then I asked him to put me on a horse tranquilizer (as a joke). He didn't laugh. He bluntly said no.

I would rather live like this, be sleepy, be groggy, stuck in the fog, than get the horrible side effects of the sleep medications. I'd much rather deal with that on its own than become another version of myself I didn't recognize. If someone could just punch me in the face and let me get a solid REM cycle in, that would be great.

A Low Blow to Doubt

The self-doubt I experienced at first was confused for the doubt that many teenage girls go through. I thought it was typical to be young and feel like I'm not good enough. As I got older though, the doubt continued and I became numb to everything. Every relationship I've ever had in my life, I always blamed myself for how things turned out. It hasn't been until lately that I've realized there are some real assholes and negative people out there that should take responsibility for their own doings. Like Jesse; he knew he was being a dick. He knew about my depression, they all did, but he still let me blame myself for everything he was doing wrong.

In fact, most guys I dated did. I made sure to give them the warning speech.

"Listen...here's what you are getting yourself into..." and I made sure to tell them about my illness, about how I would be acting, how it wouldn't be their fault, and how they would need to be supportive. Each one went along with it. Maybe they thought they could handle it. They were always wrong. It even ate away at Bryan at times.

I hadn't been feeling the same way lately though. Maybe because the negativity is gone in my life or maybe I've just come to realize that I am not worthless. I remember the day it used to follow me like a shadow. I remember the days of asking God to just let a bus hit me and put me out of my misery. It would be like that amazing scene in *Mean Girls* when Regina George gets hit by a bus, except there would be no back brace for me. It would all just come to an end.

It's been almost two years since I left Jesse and I think that has a lot to do with why I am not as bad as I was. Being in unhealthy relationships can make an unstable person fly off the tracks. I don't want to seem heartless; I did care for him, but he liked to

dominate. He liked to make me feel like a puppy sitting in their own piss; helpless, scared, afraid they were going to get in trouble. He'd tell me how much he loved me and then he'd bitch about my weight. Last time I checked he didn't have a six-pack going on either. Hell, it looked like he chugged a few of them. The constant chatter about other women in front of me made me feel invisible. I wasn't pretty enough, I wasn't skinny enough, and nothing I did would ever live up to his standards. I didn't want to marry this person, I couldn't. For as much sympathy as he said he had for me and my depression, he sure liked fueling that fire.

I actually met Bryan through Jesse. Bryan and I connected instantly. We became good friends. He knew Jesse and I were together, so he never overstepped my boundaries. As time went on though, Bryan started becoming everything Jesse wasn't. He was kind to me, we had meaningful chats (Jesse always stared blankly at his phone while I talked), and he had a wicked sense of humor that always cracked me up. There were moments I didn't feel right talking to Bryan. I almost felt like I was cheating, emotionally anyways. After a few months of blissful texting, I told Bryan we had to stop. I felt like I was crossing a line, especially since the feelings were blossoming for him.

We didn't speak for almost six months and I missed him every day. I hoped he would send a text. I would catch myself staring at my phone waiting for it to light up with his messages, but it never did. Two weeks before Jesse and I broke up, I texted him. My heart and stomach sank as the message was sending. *What if he didn't want to talk to me again? Did I blow my chance already?* Thankfully he responded like nothing had happened between us. We finally met up face-to-face a few weeks later for drinks. I told

him about me calling off the wedding and leaving Jesse. He asked if he was the reason why. I told him he partly was.

I liked him, a lot. I left Jesse because he was pushing me to get married and have kids and everything was mapped out and my uterus had a deadline. I didn't want those things, not right now anyways. I lost myself in whatever Jesse wanted. What did I want? I wanted Bryan, just not now. I didn't want to jump into something right away. I wanted to figure out who I was and what I wanted. I told Bryan this and he totally agreed. Friendship for now. Time to crack the identity crisis.

I have always struggled to find my identity. It's been a persistent problem since I was a child. I used to seat myself next to the adults for holidays instead of playing at the kiddy table. I never felt young at heart. I liked talking about my feelings and important things going on, not about whatever little kids talk about.

As I got older, the illness lodged itself so far into my brain when it started that I lost who I was and who I was supposed to become. I didn't know what to do besides just go with it. The illness is who I was becoming. It seemed like I didn't have a choice. I never had a chance to process things. I have always been so quick to throw myself into new things or onto new people that I never sat back and asked, "Well, who exactly is this Rachel Taylor girl?" It is still an unsolved mystery, but I'm starting to find some clues.

Brain on Fire

It's not that I'm full of dark thoughts. Believe me, I have had some bad thoughts that have even scared the shit out of me, but that's not the only thing that lurks inside of me. There were moments while driving that I wished another car would collide with mine and take my life. There were moments on the highway while going to school that I wanted to slam into a back of a semi dreaming to be decapitated. I thought about swallowing a handful of my antidepressants or sleeping pills to just see if I'd ever wake up.

You also hear about the people on the news who do something insane because of their mental illness. I knew mine wasn't that bad, but what if one day I snapped? What if I really would harm myself? Worse, what if I would harm someone else, someone I loved? It didn't seem like such a farfetched idea. That terrified me. I would try to close my eyes and shake the thoughts out of me, but it seemed like they were latched onto my brain. All of this has been pumping through my brain for years.

I mean I guess we should talk about the elephant in the room. The year I entered high school, I started to carry a knife in my back pocket at home. It never cut through my skin, but it would always trace a nice light white line across my wrists.

There were nights I would carry it in my room or down in the basement and just cry uncontrollably while it traced my skin. The icy blade felt comforting against my warm rough skin. I picked a steak knife from our kitchen drawer. It wasn't sharp enough to cut straight through, but I knew if I wanted to, it would get the job done. Thoughts of ending my life have crossed my mind more than I'm willing to admit. At the age of fourteen I thought about ending it all. I couldn't do it though. I always saw my grandpa's

face when it got real bad, and I knew that calling it quits is something he wouldn't want for me.

The bad thoughts stopped for a while, until about five years ago, when I was with Chris. The thought of marrying him, someone I clearly knew was not the one for me, made me miserable. There were days I would have to pull into the old abandoned church parking lot near my house and just cry. I don't mean the type of held in crying you do in the movie theater. I was screaming, gasping for air, hot tears burning my cheeks. Traffic passed a few feet from me, but no one seemed to notice the drama taking place in my car. These uncontrollable cries seemed to be a pattern with me.

The same cries haunted me when Jesse came into my life. I remember collapsing in my hallway. Sitting my back against the pillar, grabbing bits of carpet under my fingers. I remember calling my best friend, Addy to come stop me from doing something stupid. She had never seen me like that before. She had never heard me admit that I wanted a random car to hit me and make it all stop.

Well I'm Not PMS-ing

Being irritable, in my experience, can take many forms...sometimes too many forms. I used to have patience with people. I used to be able to tell if I was truly irritated with someone or if my depression was getting the best of me. It's too hard to tell anymore. I walk away from situations with people if things get heated. I need time to calm down and act rationally about the situation.

I feel bad for my parents, especially my mom. She gets the worst of it from me. Granted, she does have OCD and asks me the same frickin question eighteen times a day, but I try to be calm with her, but it's never easy. She repeats herself all day long, telling me the same things like a broken record. I always end up snapping. Sometimes I ignore her; sometimes I mumble things under my breath. I hate this. We were just starting to rebuild a relationship between us the last few months. I pushed her away all of these years. Her hugs burned my skin. I was finally letting her in; but sometimes this demon got the best of me.

My dad doesn't see it so much. He is usually at work and we don't have the best relationship anyways, so we don't really talk regularly. My poor mother. I wish I could make it stop. I wish I could make my words soft instead of always punching her in the face with them. She understands though. She's gone through this herself at one point. She knows the daily battle I struggle with. It's funny how we hurt the ones close to us, isn't it? Even when they totally understand us better than anyone else.

I feel bad for the guys I've obliterated in my path. Poor things. They didn't stand a chance. I tried to warn each of them about what they were getting into. Depression doesn't come with a guide book and it's very hard to describe to people who haven't

gone through it. I tried my best though. I told them about how crazy I can be. How heartless and cold and numb I can be, but they still chose to love me. If only I had chosen the same thing. I walked away each time without shedding a tear. I crushed them. I stomped on their hopes off building a future with someone they cared about. I made them lose their hope of what love is.

They would always ask me what's wrong when I would get quiet. I didn't want to tell them. I'd run. It's not that I can't express my emotions to someone, but I needed a moment to ask myself, "Well, are they being a dumb ass or is my depression making me feel this way?" The first two times it was my depression; the last two guys though were just being dumbasses.

Unfortunate Events

I never had a lot of time for really being a kid, even in high school. I started working at the diner when I turned sixteen. That took a lot of time from my weekends with my friends. In reality, it became my excuse when I didn't want to be with anyone. I'd tell them I'd have to work and I'd miss another chance to make memories. I missed the bonfires, the late night burger eating at Sheetz, the sneaking of alcohol into a friend's house. I do regret it sometimes now. I feel like I never really got to enjoy my younger days; but a part of me didn't want to. It all seemed childish to me. I wasn't better than anyone else, I never felt that way, but it didn't seem exciting to me.

I was always an active kid: a dancer, a softball player, just always outside playing. When grandpa died, I just stopped everything. My flexible joints now began to fuse together. My beautifully turned ballet hips lost their rotation. Bursitis set in at a young age; something only old people get. I was losing my range of motion.

It was hard to get out of bed. It was hard to make decisions. My friends started growing in different directions than me and frankly, I didn't care. I craved isolation, I still do. I never knew silence could be such a peaceful sound. The quiet can be a scary place though. My thoughts take voice and become loud in my head. When you are sad or unhappy, you definitely don't want those types of thoughts creeping in. I couldn't even enjoy being alone. The walls began to close in on me. My mind was now getting a taste of claustrophobia.

My bedroom, my safe haven, was now a room that seemed to hate me. I wanted to throw everything away in my sight. I couldn't even sit on my bed without losing focus. The books that lined my bookshelf were now reminders that my brain couldn't process

their words. The cursor blinking on my laptop of a blank page in Microsoft Word reminded me that the words would not come.

Somehow through all of this I managed to get myself a boyfriend when I was a sophomore in high school. His name was Travis. We met in homeroom freshmen year. We were in marching band together and began to share a bus seat when we travelled for away games. One day he asked me to be his girlfriend.

I don't know if it was the depression or me just not being ready, but I never wanted to have sex with him. It was never about that. We liked each other. We were kids. I was attracted to him, don't get me wrong. Other things happened underneath the blankets while we would lie on the couch, but it never got to that point. Not in the four years we dated. Sex was never something that crossed my mind. It wasn't even an option that I thought about.

I had never been boy crazy though. I was never one of those little girls giggling or whispering to friends about the cute boy I had a crush on in class. I frankly didn't care. Looks were shallow anyways. I wanted something deeper. Someone who could make me laugh and have long talks with me. I never experienced puppy love. I never drooled over N'sync or Backstreet Boy posters taped to my wall. I haven't and never will drool over Channing Tatum in Magic Mike. I wanted more than that.

I didn't have much of a sex drive for a supposed hormonal teen. I think all the Wellbutrin and mood stabilizers were killing it. Travis never minded though. He was supportive of me getting better. He was also a nerd and always had his head in a book. He didn't want to knock me up. He had goals. He wanted to be successful and go to college, not be a baby daddy at sixteen years old. He never pressured me about it. I think he was

just trying to be nice, but maybe he just didn't want to lose his virginity to the sad girl at school.

It has been different with Bryan this past year. I crave sex and attention more than anything. I don't know if it's because of all the passion that is there or the fact that he actually engages in foreplay with me instead of jumping on top of me, but I've never experienced it before. I lost my virginity when I was twenty-one and it was not how I imagined. Apparently my vagina decided to go into hibernation for about five years. She didn't feel much down there. I know that was probably the medication too, they can ruin those kinds of things, but for a young woman, sex became something I hated.

I thought that was how it was going to be. That I would just go through the motions and act pleased and that was that. I think when I started to speak up the last two years to my doctors about side effects and concerns I was having, everything started to get a little better. It's embarrassing to talk to your doctor about your sex problems, especially when the medication is helping everything else, but sex is important too, right? Don't get me wrong, I wanted my motivation back for other activities as well, but damn, what I wouldn't give to have an orgasm with the man I love. The last few pills really killed my swag. You could shove a hammer up there and I wouldn't even notice. She was drier than the Sahara. I told my doctor that I needed this to change. I am an affectionate person and now I cannot perform the one act that proves that to Bryan. She put me on a new pill immediately. I woke up and at least had an urge for him to touch me; that counts for something I guess.

Cellulite: My Life Story Told in Braille

Pros: I lost thirty-five pounds in two months from a lack of eating.

Cons: I now have cellulite and stretch marks from the rapid loss, none of my clothes fit, and I fucked up my metabolism.

Apparently puberty got the call to attack my body right when I decided to stop doing all of my physical activities. I gained about forty pounds at this point. Something my small frame was not used to handling. Travis's friends called me fat behind my back. Freshmen year we took a band trip to Chicago. I roomed with my three best friends, Angie, Carissa, and Adrienne. We stayed up late taking funny pictures with each other. Adrienne snapped a picture of me while putting my make-up on. My ass looked like it ate itself. I was turning into a mini J.Lo but not in a sexy way. That picture still makes me want to vomit.

I had always been a skinny kid. I didn't know what to do with all of this extra weight...thankfully; I didn't have to struggle for long with it.

Right after my grandpa died, I lost my appetite completely. The thought of food made me sick. I wanted to vomit every time I tried to swallow one of the gross school lunches. Within two months a part of me was gone. My pants were sagging, everything felt loose, but every time I looked in the mirror I still saw that sad, overweight girl. I lost the weight but I couldn't lose her.

I was thirty-five pounds lighter, but the pain still weighed me down. It felt like a brick was tied to my ankles and someone threw me out to sea to sink into the abyss. My hair started falling out in bunches, my skin was lightly breaking out in pimples. I didn't

know what was happening to me. Stretch marks and cellulite began to take over my hips and thighs and stomach. I guess when you lose weight rapidly these things can happen.

Now when I look into the mirror I still see the overweight girl from high school staring back at me. The dimples and stretch marks are still in the same places. My past will always sometimes haunt me. Even after all of these years those markings still cover my body to remind me of the struggle it went through.

Banged Up

I've always bruised very easily, even as a kid. The doctors always said I was probably anemic. Black and blue splotches show up too easily on my frail white skin. I'm used to these markings and I know their pain. This pain was different. There were days I would wake up and feel like a truck hit me. It looked like someone took their anger out on me with a baseball bat.

My legs would throb from my thighs down to my ankles. My arms felt like I scooped 100 pints of solid ice cream. There were pains in my neck that I couldn't seem to crack. I felt like I was living in an eighty year olds body. Walking became a chore. I felt like I was dragging a big sack of potatoes around. My bones became heavy. I knew this wasn't normal.

I remember getting my mom to call me off school one time because my upper back felt like someone took a knife and stabbed each vertebra. I thought depression was supposed to just make you sad. Wasn't it bad enough I was in a mental war with myself? Now I have to feel like the shit got kicked out of me too? How was this fair?

The aches and pains stuck around for a while. They really didn't dissipate until this last year or so. I think getting rid of all the dark baggage these last few years with Jesse has really helped heal my body. For once I can just deal with aches and pains of getting older and don't have to blame it on something else.

Keep Calm and...

Now this is the one symptom I still can't wrap my head around. This is the one I still struggle with everyday. How does one feel anxious and numb all in the same day? There are days when I cry and cry for hours on end about how numb I feel. How does that make sense? I don't understand how I feel everything and nothing all at one time. It is the hardest thing to describe to someone.

The only person who seems to understand this is my therapist, Dr. Solstein. Perhaps because she has seen it in other patients, or maybe she's had the shitty luck of experiencing it herself, I'm not sure. I'm just glad she gets me.

Just last week I was sitting on my bed in my dark room sobbing into my pillow so no one else could hear. I hate that I don't feel anything. I think sometimes I make myself cry just to make sure that my feelings are still there. Maybe that's how I've landed in the place I am today. Maybe that's how I walked away from two men that I supposedly "loved" and wanted to marry.

Maybe they are right about me. Maybe I am just a cold-hearted bitch. I always feel like I'm caught in my own head. Nothing about me makes sense to me, so why would it to anyone else? I like to think I'm a kind person, a romantic person, someone who gives until it hurts; but then the next day I can wake up and say, "I don't want this anymore" and completely walk away from a situation without shedding a tear. Is this the depression? Or am I just inhuman?

Lately, the anxiety aspect of this has been hitting me hard. I was a nervous child. I used to keep myself up at night worrying about things, but I haven't done that in years. Honestly, I don't care enough about anything in my life right now to waste that kind of

time worrying. If something happens, it happens. For some reason though, I am experiencing full blown anxiety attacks days on end. Once again, how do I feel nothing but worry about everything all in one thought? Someone please solve this puzzle for me before I'm completely gone.

The First Disappearing Act

I was going on fifteen years old when I first disappeared.

First Therapy appointment, age 15

Her waiting room was unlike any other I'd been in before. Two leather couches were placed against the walls, one along the back, and one along the side; dusty rose colored carpeting met my shoes. There were two wooden end tables with small white lamps sitting on them. A neon pink clipboard with my name, *Rachel Taylor*, was scribbled across the top. I was to tell her about myself and fill in basic information before our session.

I heard mumbled talking coming from the next room. She had a patient. I hoped there would be no one sitting out here when I was in there. I didn't want to be heard. My hands were clammy as I filled in the sheet. I didn't need to be here. I didn't need to talk to anyone. I was fine.

Why were my mom and dad even paying for this? Why would you pay someone to listen to you? It seemed kind of pointless to me. Even if I did have some issues right now, why would I want to tell them to a complete stranger?

I hoped she wouldn't ask me about my grandpa. It would all fall apart from the start if she did. Dr. Perry said she was good though; said she would be helpful. I liked her last name though, *Solstein*. Something about it just sounded pleasant.

I sat with the clipboard on my lap and waited my turn. Daydreams began to prance around in my head. I wondered what we would talk about. Once, very quickly, I saw a flash of him lying on the kitchen floor again. I quickly snapped myself out of it.

Eyes blinked quickly. These flashes were happening more often; maybe I should tell her that. Maybe I shouldn't.

The sound of footsteps grew louder and the door in her waiting room flung open. I stood to greet her. She was very tall and lanky. She has sandy brown hair with blonde highlights that sat wispy on her forehead. Small lines etched the outsides of her lips. Her green eyes burned directly into me. There was something very captivating about her; something that felt very friendly and welcoming.

“Hi, you must be Rachel.” She shook my hand firmly as I handed her the clipboard with the other.

“Yes, hi, nice to meet you.” I shook back.

“Nice to meet you too, Rachel. Make a sharp left there and have a seat in my office.” I started walking in, she followed right behind me.

A deep emerald green couch sat perfectly centered against the back wall. Two small wooden bookshelves lined the left side of the room. They were filled with knick-knacks and books. She must have traveled a lot. A box of Kleenex sat on an end table on the side of the couch. Hopefully I wouldn't need those.

She began looking at my chart.

“Let me read this over for a minute so I can better help you today, okay?” she looked up with my chart with a charming smile on her face.

“Yeah, sure, take your time.” My hands were folded across my lap. My leg was tapping quickly. It was a nervous tic. In that moment is when I noticed myself disappearing. I kept seeing him on the kitchen floor, in his casket, under a pile of dirt. The thoughts were unbearable sometimes. I hated seeing grandma cry. I hated seeing her

all alone. I always hoped they would go together. They had been together for over fifty years; it was only fair if they departed holding hands in bed. I heard fingers snapping in front of my face.

“Rachel, did you hear my question? Are you okay?” she had a concerned look on her face.

“Oh, I’m sorry, I must have been daydreaming. What did you say?” The daydreaming was getting worse. I kept replaying moments with him and the moment I saw him lying dead on the kitchen floor. It started consuming me. I couldn’t pay attention in school. I wasn’t active in conversations, I could barely pay attention. I started disappearing and so did my mind.

“I was just wondering how you’ve been doing since your grandpa died? I think that’s what we’ll devote today’s session to if that’s okay with you.” *Okay.* I hated the thought of talking to a stranger. What was the point? They couldn’t bring him back. They couldn’t fix my broken heart. They say time heals all wounds, but it’s been months and it still feels like the day he died.

“I guess I’ve been okay. I don’t really feel like I used to. I just miss him.” I looked down at my thumbs, they were rubbing together again.

“What do you mean by you don’t feel like you used to?” she flipped the page of my chart and was ready to take notes.

“I just don’t seem to feel happy or be cheerful. At least, that’s what everyone has said.”

“So people have made comments about this?” *Didn’t I just say that?*

“Mainly my parents and some friends, but that’s about it. I mean I guess I’ve noticed some changes. I’ve lost some weight and I’m not sleeping very well. My new doctor tells me I have depression.” I shrugged my shoulders.

“You don’t think that you do?” she looked up from my chart.

“Well, I mean I guess they are right, I just never thought that was a possibility for me. I never really knew much about it before.” I crossed my legs and relaxed against the sofa. I guess talking to her seemed easier than I thought.

“I see Dr. Perry put you on Wellbutrin? Do you think that’s helping?” she was scribbling again.

“I mean it’s only been a few weeks, but I guess my sleep has been a little better and I have a little more motivation, but I still feel sad.” I crossed my arms across my chest and began rubbing my forearm.

“I think being sad is normal for what you are going through. Plus, antidepressants can take a while to get in your system. Hopefully you’ll notice a change soon.” She gave me another charming smile. I liked her. She was sincere in what she was saying. She actively listened to me and didn’t make me feel bad or ashamed about what I was saying. Maybe this would work out after all.

We talked about my grandpa the whole hour session. We talked about how I missed him. We talked about the good memories I remember with him and also about the bad moments towards the end; the ones where he got aggressive with me. We used to have tickle fights, then one day he tightened his grip around my arm and wouldn’t let go, even when I told him he was hurting me. Grandma had to step in and release him from

me. We also talked about how he kept saying he wanted to die when they made him carry around an oxygen tank for his bad lungs.

“Well, Rachel, our session is done for today. How do you feel?” she closed my chart and placed it on her desk.

“Honestly, I thought I would hate this, but I really liked talking to someone with an unbiased judgment on things.” I was on the edge of the couch.

“I think you made really good progress today. It was nice meeting with you. I think we should continue these sessions, yeah? How about you come back in two weeks?” she began filling out a date card for me.

“Sure, that sounds good.” I was actually glad to be going back. But I knew by the time I would see her in two weeks another part of me would disappear and be gone. It was already slowly happening.

A Reflection on Heartache

Online journal entries from a Confused Girl

Winter 2008

It was spring semester and my first time at Youngstown State University. I was currently at Kent State, but didn't feel like wasting the extra money on an undecided college career. I made the journey back home and started over fresh at a new school. The start of college really made my depression escalate. I was away from friends, my high school boyfriend and I broke up over the summer, and I didn't know many people back home at YSU. It was a very isolating time. I thought maybe starting college would be a fresh start, but it seemed the depression would be following me everywhere. I hoped that this semester would be different and I'd make new friends.

I registered for English 1550, a writing one course. I remember seeing his name listed under the teacher section on my schedule, Mr. Chris Wright, a name I would become all too familiar with over the next few years.

I remember walking into class the first day, a basement lab in DeBartolo Hall. The lights were a bit dim and flickering in the hallway. I walked into the computer lab meeting room. A black desk sat on the left side with a student assistant seated behind it staring blankly at a computer screen. Orange plastic chairs lined the walls. There were four labs down there, one hidden in each corner of the room. My room was in the back right. I walked into to see two vertical rows of computers with a desk facing them. I took my seat, somewhere up front where I could see, and promptly waited for my teacher to arrive. I was the first one to arrive, as usual. My anxiety and racing thoughts always made me feel like I would be the last one there. Plus, I didn't want everyone giving me the look when I walked in class; I liked giving them the look instead.

It looked like the class was filling up quickly as I saw a brownish-red haired kid-faced guy walk through the door. He had light paint drizzles of freckles on his face, greenish hazel eyes, and a half crooked smile. I remember watching him stride through the door, briefcase in hand, as I thought to myself who the hell does this kid think he is?

“Hi, my name is Mr. Wright, I’ll be your professor this semester,” he said in a monotonous voice. Really, this is my teacher? Could have fooled me. I couldn’t focus much the rest of class; his young looks were throwing me off. He went through the roster before we got started. When he said, “Rachel Taylor” aloud, I just about blushed. I raised my hand slightly. He gave me a nod and said “Hi.” His voice was deeper than I expected and had a serious tone to it while he tried to teach. I tried to listen to him talk, tried to laugh at his sarcastic wit (I think I was about the only one who got his jokes), tried to focus on anything other than this guy, but something was different, I was intrigued.

As the semester went on, I didn’t really think much of our random bump-ins around the English department or short chit-chats held in the hallway. He was being nice to me, nothing more crossed my mind. We did have our first conference coming up soon, and I admit I was a bit excited to share my ideas about my first assignment with him.

I patiently waited outside of his office in a small cubicle like area in the English department. Grey speckled carpet was plastered under my feet. The chair I was seated in wobbled a bit. This shit was old. What was my tuition money being spent on? Our conferences were split into fifteen minute sections. I waited outside in my chair and began scribbling down things to tell him when it was my turn.

I could hear light mumbling and chairs sliding into the carpeting. The girl that sat behind me in class walked out and I saw his freckled face appear. One hand popped out and gave me a welcoming gesture, "Rachel, you ready? Come on in." His head disappeared into his office and I followed.

"Hey, Rachel, how's it going? Any ideas coming to mind for your first paper?" He was super casual in his tone. I think that's why I liked talking to him. He approached things differently than other professors did. His back was pushed against his chair, slumped down, hands in a gentle fold across his chest. His light blue tie was perfectly tucked under his arms.

"Hey, Mr. Wright..."

"Please, call me Chris. I feel like my dad when people call me that." My cheeks got a little color in them; I looked down at my notes. Then my eyes met his.

"Uh, okay, Chris it is, then." I started to tell him about my ideas for class but somehow we started talking about our favorite TV shows. Laughter ensued. Our fifteen-minute session was quickly approaching thirty minutes. I could almost hear the impatience of the next student out in the office.

"Hey, Chris, I should probably go. I mean, there are other people waiting. My idea sounds good though, yeah?" I began fumbling my books and notes. He quickly stood up from his desk.

"Oh jeez, sorry I kept you so long." He eyed his brown and gold watch tightly wrapped around his right wrist. "I totally lost track of time. It was good talking to you." I could feel his smile follow me all the way out into the hallway as I walked out of the department. I had a smug smile on my face all the way to my car.

The rest of the semester is a blur somewhere lost in my chaotic mind, but I do remember that every time we had a conference for class, I laughed. Something I wasn't used to much in that point in my life. We would talk about my work in class and somehow get off topic about favorite TV shows, comic books, or something silly. Sometimes I felt awkward talking to him in that respect. I mean he was my teacher; I shouldn't be laughing in his office.

The semester rapidly came to an end, our fun meetings sadly concluded. I passed the class, and I went on my way. I didn't know that three years later I would have another hallway run in with him.

Fall 2011

I'll admit, he crossed my mind more than a few times in that three-year span of time. It wasn't really in a romantic way either. I just really liked talking to him; it felt like a friendship was forming there, a forbidden one. I looked for him so many times around the English Department. His old office was taken over by another professor, and I couldn't seem to find him in the quaint spaces of cubicles. I was hoping we could bump into each other again, but beyond my best efforts I couldn't seem to find him. It felt like he disappeared. Maybe he didn't teach here anymore. I didn't think much of it.

It's probably best we don't find each other again. My monster was attacking me more viciously than ever. Something about starting college really set off the darkness in my mind. My friends went their separate ways. I was an adult now. I was now on my own. That terrified me. The crying got out of hand. The mood swings were as reckless as ever. I didn't need to be around people anymore. I didn't want them to see me at my worst, especially not this guy. He didn't need to be involved in this.

Since I basically breathed Reading and Writing, all of my courses were held in DeBartolo for the new semester. I remember running late one day to YSU for a writing course. I was in such a hurry. I got to the first floor of DeBartolo and started bolting two steps at a time up the three flights of small stairs, hoping to make it to room 260 before class started. As I was leaping up the stairs, a man walked past me in a long grey coat, I briefly saw him out of the corner of my eye. You know when you see someone you haven't seen in a long time, and your brain won't register their presence in the moment you need it to? Yeah, that's what happened to me. It was him that I saw out of the corner of my eye, but I couldn't make the connection while I was flying up the stairs.

“Hey, Rachel” was echoed up to me as I ran past him. I quickly said hi back without batting an eye and was on my way. It wasn’t until I got to class that the bells went off in my head. I felt like such an idiot, there was the guy I was searching for the last three years and I ran past him like a bat out of hell. Damn it.

I couldn’t focus at all in class. I kept thinking about how badly I felt for being rude like that to him. I didn’t mean it. I just was in such a hurry. The feelings of obsession and anxiety awoke in my stomach. My right foot began tapping against the cement tiles while at my desk. My eyes continuously watched the hands of the clock slowly move. I had to find him. I had to get out of here and apologize. Why was this so important to me? It’s just some guy.

I was out of the room before the teacher finished giving his “and for next time…” spiel. The English department was closed up for the night. I ran back down the three flights of stairs to see if maybe he was sitting on one of the brown cozy couches in the lounge downstairs, but he wasn’t. Shit. Coming off rude is like one of my biggest pet peeves. I had to find him and apologize.

A few days went by and nothing. Didn’t see him and couldn’t find him. I wanted to apologize for how rude I probably seemed sprinting past him like I didn’t care. I took a seat in the lobby of DeBartolo to try and get some homework done while on a break. The meeting room is lined in light chocolate colored chairs, hi-top tables with stools, and a circle of curved couches. I sat in a chair near the far window with my book bag pressed against my leg. I pulled out my next book to read for class. As I was looking down at my book and reading, I could feel someone approaching me. It was him.

“Hey, how have you been?” he said with a warm smile.

“Not too bad, how about yourself?”

“I’m doing pretty well; it was good to see you the other day.”

“I am so sorry about that, I was in a hurry, I totally didn’t mean to be so rude.” I could feel my cheeks redden.

“Oh, no problem, I just thought you didn’t recognize me or something” he shrugged it off.

If only he knew.

“Well, this might sound a little random, but do you remember the conversations we used to have?” he said with a bit of hope in his voice.

“Yeah, we used to talk about the most random stuff, always made me laugh. It was nice.”

“Well, would you want to get together sometime and just talk? I really enjoyed our chats.” Was my past professor asking me out? Was I okay with this?

What harm could it do? He wasn’t my teacher anymore, nothing romantic was happening, why couldn’t we be friends?

“Yeah, sure, that would be nice.” I said hesitantly. What are you getting yourself into?

We set up a time and place (Thursday) and went on with our day. I was so anxious for this meeting. All of my friends had been away at school, so I could really use a friend to just hang out and talk with. Maybe that’s what I would get from this. That’s what I hoped for anyways.

The next day and a half felt like forever. I felt nervous and excited. Was this a date? Was he expecting something from this? Did he like me in that way? Did I like him

like that? The obsessiveness of my anxiety was getting out of control. Calm down, Rachel; just go and enjoy yourself.

Thursday finally rolled around. I was so excited to just go out and talk to someone. We met at Inner Circle Pizza in Canfield. He was wearing the outfit he had on earlier at school. Black button down dress shirt, grey slacks, and a black and grey design tie. His hair was standing straight up from the gel, I assume. He smelled musky and delicious. The conversations started to roll as soon as we were seated. The waitress had to come over at least five times to ask for our order; we still hadn't looked at the menu. I don't remember much of what was discussed that night; I just remember the kindness and laughter. He didn't make any moves, he just acted like a friend and that was exactly what I needed. We ended up talking for five hours. We shut the place down. He walked me to my car. I opened the door of my black Cobalt. His hand was placed on the right hand corner of the inside of my door.

"Rachel, I had a really nice time tonight." His feet shuffled against the cement. His gaze had not yet met mine.

"Yeah, I did too, Chris. It was nice catching up after all of this time." His eyes slowly shifted up from the ground.

"Well be careful getting home and have a good night." He leaned in for a hug. His hair smelled of Suave shampoo; his neck of Old Spice. His arms held me gently. I liked the feeling of him pressed against me. Before getting in my car and leaving, I watched him walk to his to make sure he was safe. He turned back around and shouted across the parking lot.

“Hey, would you want to do this again?” his hands formed a circle around his mouth.

“Yeah, sure, that would be nice. Text me.” He smirked and got in his car. Holy crap, I just had a nice time with a nice guy. I would later come to find that this would count as our first date.

How it evolved

A few weeks later we began dating. Things started out really great. I hadn't told him about my depression yet and he didn't seem to notice the signs yet. We began spending a lot of time together though. We'd meet for lunch at school during our breaks and I'd cook dinner at my house at night while our favorite shows played. Soon he would find out my secret. We fell in love very quickly with each other. I had never felt this kind of love before. After only a few months together we were talking about our future together.

"So, do you think you want kids?" he looked over at me one night while we were lying in my childhood bed. His eyes were sincere.

"I think so. I mean I thought I always wanted to be a mom. I just don't want them anytime soon. I need to finish school and get my degree. I need to get better." It felt like I just swallowed a rough rock. I couldn't look at him.

"What do you mean get better? Rachel, what is wrong." His back went stiff from his slumped position.

"Chris, I didn't know how to tell you before, but, uh, I've been battling depression for a few years now. It's been really hard. I'm sorry I didn't tell you." I got really good at hiding it the last few years. Tears started to form in the corner of my eyes. I can't believe I hid this from this guy. He didn't say anything at first. He just nuzzled his head into my shoulder and wrapped his arm around me. He held me like that for almost five minutes. Tears slowly slid down my cheeks. I didn't want to scare him away with this.

He was the kind of guy your parents want you to bring home. He liked spending time with my family, he'd bring me flowers randomly just to be sweet, and he always told

me how much he loved me. He was the ideal partner. I was too in love with him to see his imperfections, and he was too in love with me to see mine. These things would later tear us apart.

Things were good for now, though. We went out with friends, went out on dates, and when all else failed you could find us cuddled up on the couch watching “Community”. He took my mind off my sadness. I didn’t have time to sit on the couch or in my room and stare blankly at the walls. He made me move and go out. We were happy. I was happy. I had never known anything like this before. More talks of the future came up. We wanted to get married in the next two years and start our lives together.

Early in November of 2012 we decided to go look at rings. He wanted me to pick mine out so that I would be satisfied with it. We stopped at a few stores but things were either ridiculously overpriced or just not what suited me. Our last stop was at King’s Jewelry in the mall. I saw it right away. A beautiful (yet sensibly priced) ring with a square cut and matching band. I instantly knew it was the right fit. This is the ring I wanted to wear the rest of my life. He ended up buying it right on the spot and we took it home. I was so excited, now all he had left to do was ask my parents for my hand in marriage (I’m old fashioned like that).

My dad later told me when he asked. He did it one night while we were hanging out with my parents on the couch. I excused myself to the restroom. Chris sat on the couch with my mom while my dad was seated across from them in his recliner. My dad said that Chris asked for my hand and of course they willingly gave me away to him. They liked him, but later I’d come to find they just didn’t like him for me.

Christmas Eve 2012

Christmas Eve was always a fun celebration in my big Italian family. We would go to my dad's banquet hall and have a big Italian dinner with all of my family. It was always a nice time to see everyone and share the holiday with them. Of course Chris was with me. I thought nothing special of the day; he didn't give me any hints about the proposal or tease me about it. I know he liked being around my family, but he was always too shy to talk, something that would become a major problem in the end. His shyness made me irritable and made my depression go haywire. Yes, I was sad and sometimes I shut down, but I still had a huge personality trapped inside me. I wish he did too.

We had dinner, my little cousins sang Christmas carols, my dad dressed up as Santa for the kids. It was another successful Christmas Eve. We took pictures and shared desserts and drank way too much spiked eggnog. Chris and I stayed behind along with my mom and dad to help clean up the hall. I remember walking out into the hallway to go put something back in the closet, Chris following closely behind me. We were chatting about nothing in particular. When I turned around my whole world had changed.

Chris was down on one knee holding my hand in his.

"Rachel, I love you, will you marry me?" he was literally shaking.

I remember swiping the ring away saying, "Did you ask my parents for permission?" this was important to me. I needed their approval.

He said yes. I felt like such an idiot for asking that before giving my answer. I said yes, he kissed me, and we walked inside to give my parents the good news. Something didn't feel right though. I should be ecstatic to be marrying my best friend, right? Maybe I was just getting cold feet. Forever is a long time after all.

I walked back into the hall to show my mom and dad. My mother was seated at one of the round tables trying to gather her things before we left. I walked up to the table and gave her a Single Ladies hand gesture. She didn't seem too thrilled.

"Oh gosh, congratulations you guys." Her tone was monotonous. "Gee, mom, way to sound excited for me." My hand fell to my side.

"No, no you guys. I'm sorry, I'm just beat. I am happy for you too, really." She got up and hugged us both. I took Chris's hand and we walked back to the kitchen to show my dad. He was putting some dishes away.

"Dad," he didn't turn around.

"Yeah?"

"Dad, We are engaged." I flashed the ring at him.

"Oh that's great, hun. Congrats." Why was no one excited about this? Hadn't they said yes to him when he asked for my future? I didn't get it, but I soon would.

Not long after the engagement everything started going downhill. He stopped trying pretty much with everything. His motivation was lacking and sadness lingered in his eyes, something I was all too familiar with. He wouldn't talk to my family when they were around and it rubbed me as being incredibly rude. He wouldn't make any effort to make things better in his life. This is not the person I signed up to spend the rest of my life with. He wasn't the only one who changed.

I was already an insomniac, but my sleeping got even more out of whack. I kept questioning if I was making the right decision. If he was the right one for me. I always knew something was off about our relationship, but the not getting excited thing about the engagement really proved that to me. There were nights where I would be up all night

crying and shaking, thinking I could never go through with this. I thought that it was normal though, that everyone experienced these types of things, that maybe my nerves were getting in the way. It wasn't until my depression started getting ten times worse that a red flag went off. I should be happy about settling down, not pulling over in empty parking lots with hot tears stinging my face.

I still went through with the wedding planning though. I asked his opinion on things, but he didn't seem to care. It wasn't until I bought my wedding gown that I realized what a mistake I was making. I should have known after all the times my mom would ask, "Are you sure he's the one?" she knew. This torture went on for almost a year of on and off panic attacks and crying spells. I kept telling myself it was normal, that I was just letting my anxiety get the best of me. I would cry right in front of him and tell him my fears and he never flinched. It was like all he cared about was just making sure I was his. I couldn't take it anymore. I asked if we could postpone things for a while, blaming it on my depression getting out of control, not the unhappiness I was experiencing in our relationship. We decided to postpone the August wedding date for next year and just stay together until things got figured out.

The next few months were rough. I didn't want to be around him, I didn't want him to touch me. I was irritated all of the time. I couldn't stand being around him. He would ignore my family, ignore me, all he seemed to care about were things that were important to him, and I guess I was no longer one of those things. After months of feeling awful, I told him I wanted to take a break. We thought maybe some time away would make things better. All it did was postpone dooms day; something he was probably joyful about. We were on a break for over a month and a half. No words were spoken, no texts

were sent, no phone calls dialed. I understood why I didn't make the effort to talk to him, but this was very unlike him not to make a move to hear my voice or see my face. It put me in a state of shock, but not enough to make me pick up the phone to see if he was breathing on the other side. I needed time to think, to see if I missed him, to see if this could actually work out. So the weeks passed and we didn't talk, exactly what I needed. I needed to find myself without him, I needed to dig out of my depression and see if this was worth it. The weeks went on and neither of us reached out to each other.

Where it all went wrong

I started living my life as although he was already gone. I went out with my friends more, starting doing things for myself, and started slowly lifting myself out of my depression. Our relationship was an interesting one at that. We didn't have much in common besides both being English majors. There was just something so intriguing about him, maybe the fact that he was the first guy to actually treat me nicely and with respect in a long time. So I gave it a shot. Three years and one proposal later got us stuck in this mess.

Things were great before the proposal, we laughed, we went out, and we got along really well. Once he had me with the ring though, he stopped trying. All of the goals and ambitions for the future went flying out the window. I'm the one who is depressed, but yet he moped around all day long looking just miserable and sad. I tried to offer help, be his motivation, help him be successful, but nothing ever stuck or worked. He was giving up on himself, so why shouldn't I give up on us?

I got in my car ready to go and break it off. This was a pre-meditated event. It was looming for months. The wedding was postponed in December (my choice of course), a time when everything should have been cut off, but we decided to keep trying. A horrible mistake. The last few months of that relationship were a blur of fighting, agitated meetings, and tears falling in dark empty parking lots.

After days of repeating my speech over and over again in my head, I decided it needed to end immediately. It was a calming feeling; I didn't have that knot in my stomach for once. Another sign that I was making the right move. I took a deep breath and got in my car. The drive to his house (about thirty-five minutes), felt like it took days. My break-up mix played on in the background: I kept taking deep breaths; kept telling myself that this was for the best, that there was no sense in holding on any longer. I looked over at my purse, the one that held that sparkling ring inside. In less than two hours that ring would be placed back into his hands; back where this tragedy started.

As I got closer to his house my heart started beating rapidly. I was on the verge of having a panic attack (something very common for me). Just breathe, Rachel. Things will be alright. A million things started running through my mind. My speech, one that I had memorized for days, was becoming blurred. Another deep breath as I slowly inched my way up his driveway. Now that I was here I needed more time, I wasn't ready to break another heart. I parked my car and sat in silence for a few minutes. My heart was bouncing in my chest; my breaths deep and quick. Colors started swirling, I began getting dizzy, and my body started rapidly shaking. Get your shit together, it's time to man up and be an adult.

He came out of the house and approached my car. The look on his face said he knew what was going to happen, but he still tried to muster up a smile.

"Hi," I mumbled out.

"Hey," he said, with a half open smile.

"Um, how have you been?" my eyes glanced around uncomfortably.

“Okay, I guess...do you want to come inside?” He said as he kicked some dirt around.

“Sure, thank you.” We already felt like strangers.

We walked into the house quietly, following each other in a single file line. We sat on the couch; our knees touched. I hadn’t felt his touch in a while. We sat in silence for quite some time. I let me eyes wander around the room several times; too much of a coward to look him in the eyes. Finally the silence broke and things got a little out of hand.

“Well basically, I came here today to talk about this break and our relationship,” I said.

“Okay?”

“I honestly don’t know what to say...I’m just not happy anymore.” The words cut like glass.

“Well, what happened? You were fine a few months ago,” his anger started bubbling.

“I was not fine. How could I be fine? I called our wedding off for God’s sake! Things weren’t fine and they’re still not!” (My depression and bipolar tendencies got way out of hand a few months back when the pressure started building up).

“Well, it’s not like you’ve made things easy for me either!” he spitted out as he rolled his eyes.

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?” Now he was pushing my buttons.

“You made me feel like shit! You ignored me, you went out with your friends instead of doing things with me, and you made me feel horrible about myself!” Those

words hit me like a brick to the face. Tears started sliding down my cheek. How did I hurt him this badly? Doesn't he know the only reason I ignored him or stayed away was to protect him from myself and my gruesome words?

Things escalated greatly over the next two hours, but somehow my message still wasn't getting across.

"Do you still want to be my girlfriend?" he said to me with puppy dog eyes. Oh God.

"No, Chris, It's over. I don't want any of this anymore." I hated being so blunt, but he just wasn't getting it.

"At least come on vacation with me just to hang out."

"I don't think that's a very good idea." Being stuck with him for another week would be treacherous.

He looked at me in a way he had never looked at me before. I could see the sadness building in his eyes.

"Please just promise me you'll try and have a good time with your family. I know circumstances are shitty, but this is your vacation, you deserve a little fun." I tried to be encouraging. I still wanted him to have a great life, just without me in it.

"How can I have a great time when the love of my life is walking out on me?" a tear began to form in the crevice of his eye. We hugged and cried, the kind of crying you usually don't want your significant other to see. I took the ring out of my purse and placed it in his hands. He just looked down at the box, no words were forming.

I told him how sorry I was, that I wish things could be different between us. I could see in his eyes he still wasn't completely getting it. He wanted us to work out no

matter what. He ended up walking me to my car. We hugged again, and yet again he asked me to be his girlfriend. I couldn't take it, I had to get out of there. I got in my car and began slowly driving down the driveway. The last image I have of him was him standing in his doorway waving goodbye to me with the saddest look on his face. I was now leaving behind the man I searched so hard for years before.

Black Heart

A starless night sky. The color of tar sticking to your shoe. Close your eyes and see the darkness that lives in your nightmares. This is the color of my heart. I wouldn't call it evil. I don't feel like a bad person, but there is a chill that lives inside me. I guess I would maybe describe it as sheets of ice stretched in all directions. Darkness isn't usually the right word to describe what's in someone's heart. Most would think of the organ pumping life into you as vibrant. The color vanished from mine years ago. I barely remember the life that used to live inside of it.

In school we learn that the heart is the most vital organ in the body. It is in charge of pumping blood through our veins to the organs that need it so we stay alive. The last time I checked, my heart was pumping sludge through my veins. You could almost trace the darkness on my pale arms. My body wasn't always like this and my heart wasn't always frozen and bitter. When I was younger, I was considered 'normal.' My heart was fleshy and bloody and pink. The blood that ran through my veins was like a fine wine. The day he died though, my heart froze over.

From that point on, I didn't let anyone in. I held my parents at arm's length. I didn't want to see grandma. I didn't want to get close to anyone again, because chances are, they would die (like everyone does) and I wouldn't be able to handle it again.

People still think I'm caring, still think that I'm giving and kind. I am those things still, but I'm also pessimistic, I don't show emotions, and I detach myself from everything. Thank God I can hide my rotting heart inside me. I hate my heart, so I can only imagine how others would view it.

It wasn't my fault though. I wish people could know that. He left me here alone and before I knew it, depression and anxiety consumed my whole being. My warm, caring heart melted away and in its place, a rock-hard piece of coal formed.

My dad sometimes calls me "The Man-Eater", because I break hearts and act like nothing just happened. I can't feel anymore. I just know that I get irritated with people's bullshit and then I walk away and move onto the next target. I think some people would call it a blessing to not be heart-broken in these types of situations, but what they don't get is if it's that easy to walk away, then did I ever feel love to begin with? I used to believe that true love existed (a part of me still does to a certain extent), but I don't think I'm capable of feeling it. I feel infatuation. I feel lustful, but those aren't love.

I thought medication would help. I thought I would stop being irritated and angry and I would begin to warm up again, but it still hasn't happened. Maybe I am on the wrong pills. Maybe I can't come back from this. Maybe I never had a heart to begin with.

I try to close my eyes and forget about the day. I try to wash it away and start over new, but even when I wake in the morning it feels like my eyes are still squeezed shut and the nightmare still hasn't ended.

I Hope You Can Return It

The fall of 2014

There it sat on my night stand, a haunting reminder of what I needed to do. It greeted me each morning with the hopes of me changing my mind and it lingered there each night with fear knowing my mind was made up.

My small desk lamp always provided a spotlight for it. The darkness of it stuck out like a sore thumb in my light room. The black velvet box called for me to run my fingers over it, but I knew what it held inside. I didn't want to see that sparkle again. I didn't want to think of the future I was supposed to have.

This wasn't how I saw my future going at all. I wasn't ready to break another heart. I wasn't ready to hand back another ring. I didn't want to be that girl. I had to do it though. Jesse wanted different things than me. He wanted marriage and a family, and I didn't know what I wanted. The hours of soul searching and therapy still weren't answering my questions.



We had been growing apart for months but no one wanted to say anything. It was hard for us to leave each other. When I first met Jesse I thought all my prayers had been answered. I went through a lot of shitty relationships before him; and somehow he seemed different. There was a sadness that lingered between us now. The sadness told me that it was time to move on from the situation, but I couldn't seem to get away. I was still intrigued by him. I begged him to go to therapy with me. I had already been seeing my therapist for a few years now, Dr. Solstein. I really liked her. She made me feel

comfortable and I was always open with her. I thought he would like her. I thought she could help us. He said no, so no it was.

Our lovely home had now become a war zone...what we were fighting for anymore, I'm not sure. We barely spoke to one another while at home. It seemed like the only way I could get a response from him was through texting. Texting was not the way I wanted to handle personal matters of our relationship, especially when ending one, but that seemed like my best option.

A month and a half prior

I sent the text. I'd been meaning to send it all day. The letters kept clicking on my cell, but for some reason I couldn't let my finger push 'send'. Hours went by and I knew I finally just had to do it. It was 12:23 P.M. when it sent; it took him less than a minute to respond.

Me, 12:23: Jesse, we need to talk. I know things have been awkward lately and I think we should address them. I thought maybe I could make dinner tonight when you get off work and we could chat. Ok?

Jesse, 12:24: Okay...I guess that's fine, Rachel. I just want to figure things out already...

Me, 12:25: Okay. I'll see you back at the house later

Jesse 12:25: Alright, see you then.

I could already feel the coldness from him just through the phone. He knew what was coming; we both did. I was more willing to accept it than he was though. It was my fault after all. I didn't want this anymore.

How did we get to this point? We were so happy just a few months ago. His hazel-green eyes used to meet my baby blues with such excitement. His bulky-wide frame swallowed my tiny slender physique in an awkward but comforting way. His lips, often chapped always met my soft pout with lust; the hairs from his scruff always tickling me. But we hadn't looked at each other that way in what seemed like forever. The excitement in his eyes was gone; only confusion and resentment lingered there now. He hadn't touched me, not like the way he used to, in what seemed like weeks. The passion (the little that we had), was now dry and fizzled out.

I kept repeating my speech over in my head. I kept trying to prepare myself for the heartbreak that would occur in the next few hours, but there's no easy way of doing that. I glanced through my phone and decided to call Dr. Solstein. It was getting to be that time again. I needed to see her. I needed to figure this out. I needed to figure me out.

A few rings bounced into my eardrums. "Thank you for calling the office of Dr. Solstein, I am currently unavailable right now. Please leave me your name and number and what I can help you with and I'll get back to you as soon as possible." Beeeeeep.

"Hi Dr. Solstein, this is Rachel...Rachel Taylor. I haven't seen you in a while and I think I need to. Do you have any time to squeeze me in this week? It's kind of an emergency. You can call my cell. Thank you." The phone clicked off. I couldn't help but keep staring at the blank screen. I needed to talk to her, immediately. She was the only one who was blunt with me and that's what I needed. She's the only one I could tell these things to. She wasn't just a therapist, she was saving my life.

Later that evening

I heard his Cadillac roll into the driveway. I watched him through the edge of the window. He was moving slowly, trying to prolong each movement to stop the inevitable from happening. He bent over to grab his things from the backseat. He looked good from behind. He wrapped his briefcase strap around his shoulder and threw his jacket over his left arm as the door slammed and he made his way up the driveway. I pulled my face away from the window and turned the front porch light on for him. His dark shadow bounced off of the white shutters and made a disheveled silhouette on our beige paneling. I noticed paint was flaking off of our cream colored door as I opened it for him.

“Hi” I mumbled out.

“Hey.” He brushed his way past me. He barely even looked at me. He threw his things down on the kitchen chair.

“So, where should we do this then?” he loosened the tie around his neck. I pointed towards the couch in the living room. Framed pictures of ‘happy’ us skirted the room.

Silence sat between us for far too long. Our eyes darting around the room, too cowardly to look each other in the face. We had walked to the couch in a single file line. This was our home, a place that used to be warm and filled with laughter. The pictures dangling from the refrigerator of us used to make me smile. Now, irritability was the only thing that greeted me when I reached for a snack.

The warmth of our home was sucked out a few months ago when feelings started to alter. Our coldness froze everything over. We’d been living the past few weeks as strangers. Jesse would work late nights at the office and I would work early mornings and

afternoons at the diner. This place didn't feel like ours anymore. We weren't even staying in the same room. We hadn't made love in nearly six weeks.

Our knees touched as we sat side by side on the couch. I hadn't felt his touch in some time, but something didn't light up inside me this time. Another affirmation that what I was about to do was the right thing for us.

I put his hand in mine. I gulped as I slowly allowed my eyes to reach his.

"Jesse, you know that I love you..." I could feel the tears welling in the corner of my eyes. This was not how I expected to react. I mean I knew I cared, I'm not a cold-hearted bitch, but I didn't think those feelings existed anymore.

His hand was snatched from mine. He began rubbing his face, his hands hovering over his eyes.

"Look, Rachel, I know things aren't good between us now, but I love you and you are worth fighting for. Let me fight for you, please."

I sat down today knowing what I wanted to do. I knew I wanted to walk away. I knew it was over. But seeing him like this, vulnerable and sensitive, was something I rarely got to see. I could feel my mind shifting.

"Rachel, just talk to me! Tell me what's wrong; tell me what I can do to fix this!"

"Jesus, Jesse, I'm not happy anymore. This isn't what I want for my life. I have goals, I have plans. I don't want to be some housewife or stay at home mom. I want a career!"

"Well, who's stopping you from that? You know I support everything you do."

"Really? Well geez, you could have fooled me!"

“And what’s that supposed to mean. You know how talented I think you are! You know I want you to finish school first before we make any plans!”

“Oh, so is that why I keep hearing that in the next five years I have to give you two kids or else? That’s such bullshit. What about what I want?”

“And what is it that you want, Rachel, huh? Do you even know?”

“I know that I don’t want this!” the words slapped both of us in the face. The momentum of our argument came to a rapid halt. We both slid back on the couch, exhausted from the yelling.

I turned to Jesse to see his reaction. His eyes were wide; I think the shock was settling in.

“Look, Rachel, please don’t make any rash decisions. Can’t we take a break or something?”

Jesus, what is this? High school? My heart didn’t want him anymore, but something was holding me back from saying my last words.

What if he’s right? What if I don’t know what I want or what I’m doing? Maybe a break would help me clear my head before completely getting rid of him.

“Fine, Jesse, let’s take a break.” It wasn’t exactly what I wanted, but a part of me wasn’t ready to fully let go. I could hear him let out a sign of relief. He gets to keep me a little longer.

“So, Rach, do you wanna set rules or something for this?”

“I just don’t think we should see each other. If you want to text or talk here and there that’s fine. I’ll tell my mom I’m moving back in tomorrow...I’ll try and have my stuff packed up in the next few days.”

“How long is this going to go on for?”

“As long as I need it to”

“Okay, fair enough.”

I turned my back and walked into my bedroom. I had started sleeping in the guest room the last few weeks. We were in no position to be in the same room together, let alone share a bed.

I looked down at my phone while crawling into bed. I had a voicemail.

“Hi Rachel, this is Dr. Solstein. I want to see you tomorrow, think you have time to stop in? How’s 1:30? Call me back.”

Oh thank god. I really needed her more than ever.

I dialed her number in hopes of hearing her voice.

“Hello, Rachel is that you?”

“Hi, Dr. Solstein, I just got your voicemail, I’m sorry I missed your call. Do you still have time to squeeze me in tomorrow at 1:30?”

“Yes, Rachel, it’s been a long time. I want to make sure you’re okay. What happened to seeing me every 2 weeks? You know you shouldn’t skip our meetings, especially with how out of hand your depression has been.”

Ah, the disappointment has come back to haunt me.

“Yes, Dr. Solstein, you’re absolutely right. I’m sorry; I will definitely be there tomorrow.”

“Great, see you then.”

I tucked myself into bed, clothes on and all. I wanted to forget about tonight. I just needed her to give me some answers tomorrow.



The next day

Jesse was still sleeping when I left the house for my appointment. I didn’t bother to wake him to tell him where I was going. I wasn’t his responsibility anymore.

I got in my car and my fingers fumbled over my iPod to find my mix. The melody started and began to fill my ears.

“*Say something, I’m giving up on you...*” the words bounced off my windows and into my heart. I let out a sigh and backed out of the driveway. She wasn’t far from me, just a few blocks away. I let the song play on repeat until I pulled into her parking lot.

She was waiting at the door for me when I walked up the stairs to her office. She usually makes me wait a little, but not today. She must have sensed I needed her.

She told me to have a seat on the plush green couch in her office as she closed the door behind us. It was now time to let my secrets and awful thoughts linger in this room.

“So, Rachel, it’s been quite some time, hasn’t it?”

I nodded, “Yes, I’m sorry I haven’t been coming in lately.”

“So, what’s been going on? Last time I talked to you things were going really well with you and Jesse. Is that still the case?”

I felt my frown lines tug a little deeper south, “No...that’s not the case anymore. The last two months have been awkward, but also eye-opening. I just don’t think we want the same things, and honestly, he’s not turning out to be the person I thought he was.”

“I see. Are you sure we aren’t having a repeat of last time? Remember what happened with the engagement with Chris?”

The pit in my stomach returned. “Oh my god, this has nothing to do with that. I know this is my second engagement, but these guys aren’t turning out to be who they promised they would be...who I needed them to be.”

“Maybe that’s the problem, Rachel. You are still trying to figure out what you need.”

She’s right, yet again. I didn’t know what I wanted or needed and I should by now, I’m fucking twenty-eight years old and still have no idea who I am. The last few months have been revealing though. I always thought I wanted to get married and have a family, always. Then Chris and I got engaged and it ended in shambles. I thought I just

didn't want to marry him; that we weren't clicking anymore, but that doesn't seem to be the case.

Jesse and I shared that passion as well. Jesse lit a fire in me I never knew existed before. We were in sync with each other; we shared the same thoughts and humor. He wanted kids and to be married and I wanted to give that to him. It wasn't until the last few months when I woke up one day and everything felt different. I changed my mind that day. I hadn't let myself be selfish ever, and now was my time. I didn't want to be tied down to someone for all eternity nor did I want a screaming baby to take care. I wanted to be alone.

"Rachel, are you listening to me?" I switched back into reality.

"Yes, yes. I'm sorry, I'm just processing everything."

"Rachel, you need to take some time for yourself and figure things out. You need to find out what you want from your life, before you hurt yourself or anymore of these guys."

"You're absolutely right. They don't call me the man-eater for nothing." I tried to chuckle.

A sly grin appeared on her face. "Rachel, you're allowed to change your mind; you're allowed to figure things out. I just want to see you do it before hurting anyone else."

"I know. Jesse and I agreed to take a break for a while. I think I'm going to move back home until things are resolved."

“I think that’s what’s best. Are you still seeing Dr. Perry for your depression?”

Shit. She’s onto me. She knows when I’m not taking care of myself.

“Umm, no. I haven’t seen him lately. I know I should, but I’ve felt so much better without those drugs in my system. I feel like everything is so clear lately. Maybe I haven’t been stuck in a depression with Jesse, maybe I’ve just been in an unhappy relationship.”

“I think it’s both. I’m glad you are feeling better, but please call him and set up an appointment. I don’t want to see this get out of hand again. You remember what happened last time.”

Yes, I remembered, all too clearly. The endless crying in empty dark parking lots, the sleepless nights, the day I collapsed on my living room floor, begging whatever God there is to take me away from this place. I didn’t want to remember, but it was too hard to forget.

“Yes, Dr. Solstein, I will give him a call when I get home.”

“Good, Rachel. I want to see you back in two weeks, will that work for you?”

“Yes, that would be great.”

She handed me an appointment card dated for two weeks in the future. Same time, same place. I shoved the card in my purse and got into my car.

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One week before present day

I hadn't seen Jesse in over five weeks. All my things now lingered in my old bedroom back home. My mother's face is the only familiar thing I've seen in weeks. He hasn't called or texted. I guess I don't blame him. I haven't either.

I guess I'm getting what I wanted, to be alone. I've figured out some things, but it's gotten pretty lonely at times. I miss having that connection with someone. I miss being a girlfriend.

The endless late night chats with my mom have been helpful to say the least. She's always been on my side, but the conclusions I've come to the last few weeks about my life were hard to swallow, let alone try and talk to her about them.

I told her that I didn't want to get married, not anytime soon anyways, and if I did, I wanted to go to the courthouse and do it. Make it as quick and painless as I can. I told her that I didn't know if I wanted to have kids. I thought I would always be a good mom. I thought I always wanted that out of my life. I knew she wanted grandkids and I wanted that for her too, but I needed to be selfish right now. I told her that I don't want to birth my own children. That if I do want kids, I want to adopt them. I didn't see the point of bringing a new life into this world when there are so many out there that could use my help. She didn't say much, just nodded and listened. She ended the conversation by saying, "You could never disappoint me, Rachel." I don't know if that's necessarily true or not.

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Back to present day

The last few weeks have gone by quickly, and I didn't miss Jesse, not in the way I should. I knew I had to get this over with. I texted him to set up a time for our final chat.

Me: Hey Jesse, I was wondering if you wanted to talk. I think enough time has passed and I think we both deserve some answers.

Jesse: oh thank god, I couldn't stand it much longer. Can you come tonight?

Me: yes, I'll be over in an hour...ok?

Jesse: okay.

I grabbed the ring off my dresser and threw into in my jacket pocket. I could feel my stomach twisting and turning as I got into my car to make my final drive to see him.

I thought I would feel more anxious or sick, but a slight calmness kicked in as I parked in the driveway.

The door was unlocked and half opened for me. He was sitting on the couch staring deep into the carpet when I walked in. I felt the ring shift in my pocket.

“Hi Rach, do you wanna come sit on the couch?”

“Sure, thanks.” I sat a few feet away from him; I was scared to get any closer.

“So, I think I know what decision you've made, but why don't you tell me anyways.” He slouched into the couch and peered my way.

“God, Jesse, I never thought it would come to this, really. I am so sorry to hurt you like this, but this isn't going to work out the way you planned it to.” I kept rubbing my fingers with my thumb as I talked, unable to fully look up at him.

“Well, what happened Rachel? Things were fine a few months ago? I don’t get it.”

“I don’t get it either, I just woke up one day and changed my mind about everything. I realized this isn’t the life I want to live.”

“I see.” His hands started rubbing his face again, his eyes shifted all around the room.

“I just don’t want to get married, not now, maybe not ever, and I most certainly do not want kids, not the way you want them.”

“We don’t have to get married, ya know? We can call off the wedding and just stay together, why can’t we do that?”

“Jesse, seriously? What would be the point of that? You’re still going to want those things and I’m not. I don’t want to hold you back from finding someone who can give you what you want; what I can’t.”

“But I love you, Rachel. You are everything to me. I don’t need to get married or have a family as long as I have you.” I could see the sadness settling in his eyes.

“Jesse, I love you, you know that. But if I hold you back from getting the things you’ve wanted all your life, I would hate myself, and I think you would grow to hate me too.”

I felt the shakiness set in. I saw the tears fall from the corner of his eye.

“So this is it then, huh?” his face was shades of pink, his voice crackled.

“Jesse, I don’t know what else to do at this point. I can’t give you what you want, and I can’t stay with you just because there are still some feelings here.”

“You know, I’m going to love you for a long time, right? I don’t know how I’ll be able to get over you.”

“I know. This isn’t easy for me either.”

We sat in silence for a few minutes. His widened eyes stared at the carpet again; I focused on the fire my fingers were starting.

I finally looked over at him. “Can I give you a hug?”

His head barely nodded. I slid myself over to his side of the couch. I placed my head on his chest as his tattooed arms bundled me into place. His head was resting on top of mine. I could feel his tears wetting my hair. His heart gently thumped in his chest. This type of interaction didn’t happen much between us. I was the romantic one; he barely had an ounce in him. I craved to be held like this so many times by him; it’s sad that now when things are ending I finally got it.

I lifted my head off his chest. Our eyes met and we just held each other’s glances for a few seconds. I put my right hand on his face and rolled my fingers off his scruff. He smiled a little through his tears. He gently pushed his rough lips against mine. I tasted the salt from his tears.

This kiss was different. I’d never had him kiss me like this. Maybe because we knew it would be the last time. Whatever it was, I wished I could have had more of it. I pulled his face in closer to mine, our noses wrestling with each other. Both of his hands

gently caressed up and down my back. He had never been gentle with me before, was this his attempt at trying to keep me?

With both of my hands on his cheeks, our faces struggled from left to right as our tongues lashed out at different angles. I could feel that fire burning in his kisses, and surprisingly I could feel it in myself too.

His weight shifted as he laid me down on the couch while he hovered over me. I felt his scruff and peeling lips attack my neck. I let out a small whimper as his tongue and sloppy kisses trailed my neck and ear. My back began to arch as I pulled him down on top of me. He knew this was my weakness. I think he was planning this all along.

My fingers traced in circles up and down his spine. He felt soft, warm. I hadn't felt in him what seemed like ages. I pulled his white t-shirt over his head. He had a few chest hairs, not very manly, but manly enough for me. He slid off his sweats and boxers with one hand while hovering over me. His eyes met mine.

“Rachel, are you sure you want to do this? I don't want to make your uncomfortable.”

“Yes, Jesse, I think we owe it to ourselves.”

He sat me halfway up and made me put my hands in the air as he slowly tugged my shirt over my head. He stopped and stared at me, his eyes feeling like he wanted to devour me.

“What? What's wrong?” I slid my arms across my chest trying to still hide my imperfections.

“You know you’re beautiful, right?”

What was happening here? He never said anything remotely close to this to me before? Why was he showing me this side of him now? Why not when I asked for it?

I pulled his face close to mine again and kissed him while his hands made their way around my back to unclasp my bra. We were slowly forming a messy scattered heap of clothes on the floor.

He laid me back down again. His lips met my neck again. His lips and my neck were like old friends, they didn’t always see each other, but boy when they did, it was pure magic. His kisses began to make their way all over my body. His hands and lips met my breasts with a bolt of electricity. A hunger rose inside of me that I never knew existed. My fingers ran through his hair as he kept trailing down my body.

I couldn’t keep my eyes open at this point. I was in a state of ecstasy I had never experienced. I didn’t know exactly what he was going to do next, but god whatever it was; I didn’t want it to stop.

I heard the zipper and then I felt him fingering the buttons on my jeans. He pulled them off of me very carefully; I don’t think he wanted to seem animalistic like he has before. He’s planned out this whole romantic, gentle thing way too well tonight.

My eyes opened. I realized he had stopped.

“Jesse, what’s wrong?” he was supporting himself on his knees.

“Nothing, Rachel...I just can’t believe this is it...I can’t believe you want to give this up.”

“I don’t think I have much of a choice, Jesse.”

“I know, babe, I’m just going to miss this...I’m going to miss you.”

He slowly lowered his face towards mine as he kissed my forehead. I pulled his chest to mine. I had never craved him like this before. Our lips met again as my hands shifted between running through his hair and rubbing his back. My legs became twisted behind his back. I could feel the fire burning between us. I needed to have him; I’d never had him in this sense. I needed to see that he was human and emotional and not some animalistic robot without feelings.

He slowly slid himself inside of me, careful not to cause me any pain (it had been a few months at this point). I had forgotten what he felt like. I had forgotten how good this could be. It didn’t take long for either of us between the slow thrusting and passionate kissing. He collapsed on top of me; his head buried in my chest. Only our heavy breathing filled the air. He flopped onto his back right next to me, our bodies pushed so close together so I wouldn’t slide off the couch.

“Jesus, babe that was incredible.” His right arm resting over his forehead while he glared at the ceiling.

“Yeah, that was pretty great.” I glanced over at him.

“I don’t think we’ve ever connected like that before. It was kind of amazing.”

Yeah, it was kind of amazing, kind of sucks that it took us to get to that point to have that kind of connection.

“Rachel...” he turned on his side to look at me, “Will you please keep in touch?”

“Of course, Jesse. You have my number if you ever need anything. This wasn’t some hit and run type of thing, I still love you...but we can’t be together. You know if you need anything or to talk or whatever, I’m just a phone call away.”

“I know, I just don’t know what I’ll do without you.”

I kissed his forehead. Within a minute or so he was snuggled up against me fast asleep. I gave him the courtesy of staying for a while; pressed up against him, just to make sure he was really asleep.

I gently lifted his arm and slid out of the couch. I threw a blanket over him and tucked him in. He looked so peaceful, like none of this ever happened tonight. Like I didn’t just break his heart. I quickly and quietly threw my clothes on, making sure not to wake him. I gazed upon him one last time. I reached into my pocket and pulled out that black box. I pushed it around in my hand. There my future sat in my palm, and I was giving it back. I placed it on the coffee table and made my way to the door.

I slid the key into the lock and then unhooked it from my keychain. I slid it under the door. I did not belong here anymore.

My car keys fumbled in my hand. Freedom. The last few hours were a baffling blur. The only thing I remember him saying was, “Rachel, if you walk out that door, don’t expect me to be here waiting for you.”

I didn’t. I didn’t expect anything anymore.

Undisclosed Information Part 2

I used to be anxious when I was a kid. There were nights I would make myself so nervous before a big test at school. I would barely sleep. My mind would race one-hundred miles an hour. This kind of tapered off as I grew older. So when my one doctor told me I was experiencing anxiety symptoms, I had to question him. I didn't feel worried or nervous or anxious about anything, in fact, I barely felt anything. But my body was shaking, hands trembled all day long. Each morning I was met with the feeling of a brick sitting on my chest. I wasn't so much experiencing the mental symptoms, but the physical.

What is anxiety?

Anxiety is a normal emotion that everyone feels from time to time.

Anxiety disorders are different though. They can cause distress that interferes with your ability to lead a normal life. This type of disorder is a serious mental illness. These symptoms can be disabling. With treatment, many people can manage those feelings and get back to a fulfilling life.

Barely Breathing

I really didn't think it was possible to feel uneasy and anxious for no reason, but apparently I was wrong. I've never been one to get too riled up about a situation. I mean yeah, I'd get nervous the night before a big test at school, but that was when I was young. I had no reason to be worried about anything now.

About two months ago, I woke up one day and felt horrible. I felt like a brick was sitting on my chest. My body was shaking and my hands were trembling. It felt like my organs were pushing against my skin trying to escape. I tried the old breathing into a paper bag trick, but that didn't help. I had no idea what was happening to me. My mom drove me to urgent care.

After hours of waiting and numerous routine tests, they told me that what I was experiencing was anxiety. But I don't have a reason to have anxiety. My stomach didn't feel like I was taking a roller coaster ride. I was just having the physical symptoms; nothing troublesome was running through my mind. The doctor there asked me what I had been taking. I just said my Wellbutrin, 150mg per day.

"Rachel, do you still feel depressed? Have you been on the Wellbutrin long?" she asked

"I have been taking the Wellbutrin on and off for about twelve years now. I don't feel depressed anymore though. I mean I notice a difference when I take it, but I don't feel like I need it."

"Did you know Wellbutrin can cause anxiety symptoms in some patients?"

"What? No, I didn't know that?" I was furious at this point. Why would my doctors keep prescribing it to me if they knew all of this was going on? Jesus. I've been

on this for so long though, why would this just all of a sudden start now? None of this made sense.

“I am going to give you a very low dose of Xanax. I want you to take one pill a day for the next 10 days. I want you to follow up with your family doctor when this runs out, okay?”

“Yes, thank you. Should I keep taking my Wellbutrin?”

“No, I want you to stop taking that. That may be what’s causing everything.”

I didn’t listen though. You can’t just stop taking your meds cold turkey and I was not about to wean myself off of something that has worked all of these years.

Later that night I checked online to learn about Xanax. Apparently it can become addicting. Great. Just great. Another quick fix for my problems. Let’s see what the doctor can do this time.

Not a Junkie, Just Desperate

I know that I'm out of shape, but to be out of breath at twenty-eight years old really blows. It was never really bad until I had my anxiety attack episode a few months ago. I don't know why it happened that day. I'm still trying to figure it out. I woke up and my chest just felt heavy. It felt like everything was built up inside of me just waiting for me to explode.

It wasn't until I tried taking slow, deep breaths that I realized just how much was piled inside me. My parents got scared that day. I remember going downstairs to do some laundry and when I returned up the stairs, laundry basket in hand, I thought I was going to faint.

My heart started beating really fast against my chest. I got overheated and my breathing was labored. I kept clutching my fist to my chest. For some reason, putting some pressure on it helped my breathing. I got dizzy and lightheaded and slowly slumped my body onto the couch cushions.

I've had panic attacks before, but it's been years, and I actually had a reason for them. There is no reason for this to be happening right now. I just don't get it.

It started getting more intense every day. I couldn't sleep because it felt like the brick on my chest was going to slide up my throat and choke me mid slumber. There were times when I was just about to fall asleep and my breathing would stop and I'd wake myself up in a panic. I had run out of the Xanax months ago. I only took the ten prescribed pills they gave me. I tried to get into the new doctor I had lined up, but he had no time to see me.

I ended up taking myself to my family doctor's rapid care in his office. They did an EKG. I hated having those sticky squares stuck to my body. They were freezing. Everything came back normal as usual. The physician's assistant asked if I would like another dose of Xanax again. *Yes, yes I did. I needed to make this go away.* I got another ten days worth, but I couldn't get into the new doctor for four more weeks. I decided to take one every few days so I could save enough before my appointment. I at least had a short-lived solution until then so I could get by.

Drummer on Speed

There are so many ways I could describe the beating in my chest. I've experienced heart palpitations since I was younger, maybe fifteen years old. It was never anything major, just small flutters once in a blue moon. The way my heart has been pounding lately though, has definitely caught me off guard.

Have you ever felt like your heart was going to claw its way through your chest? I really hope you haven't. It's a terrible feeling. It's bad enough to experience the flutters, like a fuse just shorted inside of you; a quick tick of the heart. The horrible thumping inside of me is something I wouldn't wish on anyone.

It feels like my heart is trying to break my breast bone. It flickers lightly and then a large thump will follow. Almost like it is trying to plan a sneak attack out of my own body. I never thought I would be clutching at my chest this early in my life.

Putting some pressure on it helps. Well, I think it helps; maybe it's just my mannerism for putting me at ease. For some reason when I clutch my fist and lay my fingers against the left side of my chest, I feel better. I feel like I can breathe again. I feel like everything slowed down to its normal pace.

A normal resting heart rate is usually between 60-100 beats per minutes. My heart rate was 120 when I was sitting in the doctor's office. Double. Damn. I don't know how to slow down a heart that's stuck in an anxious body. Suggestions would be helpful, please.

Nix the Tics

I guess there have always been subtle hints that anxiety would get the best of me. I have seen little mannerisms in myself over the years. They are like little tics or twitches of my body that I can't seem to control.

It all started with the tapping of my foot. I thought it was because I was trying to keep the beat when in high school band or choir, but it's been quite some time since those activities ended for me and my foot is still going.

A few years later, the tapping worked itself into my leg, especially the right one. The vibrations worked themselves into my thighs. My whole leg was silently burning calories under my desk in college. People always commented on it. Sometimes I would feel a hand on my knee trying to stop it; most of the time it would catch me off guard. These little habits grew into me. I hardly noticed when I was doing them anymore. Sometimes I wonder if my mother's OCD is going to come for me

The last two years or so, it's been all about my fingers. When I am uneasy about something or nervous, tapping my fingers seems to keep me in check. I tap each finger to my thumb from left to right and then backwards. I don't know what it is about that, that reassures me. My last boyfriend and my mom really seemed to notice it though. They always tell me to stop or they ask why I keep doing it.

I don't know that I am. It's like these patterns crept into my mind in the middle of the night and set camp. They are just another part of me now that I need to live with.

Living with the Sahara

Remember when you were young and were playing on the beach and somehow some sand worked its way into your mouth? Remember how it made that gritty sound between your teeth? It made you cough when it tickled the back of your throat. That is what dry mouth feels like to me.

The last few years have been very weird. I thought maybe it was just my allergies acting up or maybe it was the dust collecting in corners of my room, but I can't seem to remember what swallowing with ease felt like.

I constantly feel like I have a lump in my throat. I clear my throat so much throughout the day. It especially gets worse at night. That's when my eyes and nose and throat all start to dry out together.

I drink water as much as I can throughout the day; it doesn't seem to help. My neck and glands feel very tight all of the time. It's a bit ironic that when I try and take my medicine, I sometimes can't get the pill to go down. I've choked before, on pills or food; I've choked on water in public and made a complete fool of myself.

I have never been to the desert, but I can say that I've experienced it somewhat.

Constant Discomfort

Riding the Tower of Terror at Disney is the only way I can describe nausea to you. You get that nervous panic before the ride starts and then they drop you an inch to scare you. Before you even realize what happened to you, you drop thirteen stories. Your stomach drops and you can't seem to get it back in the right spot for a few hours. I'm sure you've experienced it to some extent and I'm sure it's different for everyone.

Nausea has taken many forms for me. I get a stomach ache, I get cramps, a knot forms in my lower abdomen. Sometimes the knot works its way upward and sits in my throat and makes me want to puke. I don't puke. I mean, I have, like twice in my life, it's just not something I need to do. I'd rather feel sick all day. The last few years the knots have decided to sit upon my ovaries. As if menstruating once a month wasn't enough, now I have something squeezing my ovaries at all times. A dull ache takes over between my pelvis and hip. I don't know if something is actually wrong or if my body just still hates me.

Saltines and Ginger Ale have always been the recommended prescription for this. They just taste good to me; that's usually why I agree to eat them. I have tried plenty of things to rid my stomach of its illness, but nothing takes as usual. I hate medicines; they don't ever do anything for me, and now I've come to find, my guts hate them too.

Disturbance in the System

This is usually one of the worst symptoms for me. I always feel like both of my eyes are pushed together, but not quite overlapping. I feel like I see double of everything. I can see clearly, but I can't see clearly. I know what I'm looking at, but everything just seems out of focus. I feel like every day that I wake up someone dilates my eyes just to mess with me.

It has made the last decade of my life very stressful. It has made it very hard for me to concentrate in school. I can't seem to read Expo markers on a white board very well. I can't seem to hold eye contact with anyone for a long period of time. I need to keep my eyes constantly moving or else I get a headache or my eyes start to burn. It makes commuting back and forth to school a very hard job. I hate car-pooling with classmates. *What if I get in a wreck and something happens?* I would hate myself if that came true.

Being dizzy, suffering from Vertigo from time to time, and being lightheaded are basically a deadly combination. These don't seem like major things to most, but they are ruining my life on a daily basis. I'm pretty sure if the room would stop spinning, I could have been a better student, worker, and all around human being.

But it hasn't.

The Return of Jekyll & Hyde

Session one, age 28

The waiting room was much smaller, darker, and definitely not as nice as Dr. Perry's. I guess that's what you get in the shady part of Youngstown. You get what you pay for (and I wasn't). My insurance no longer covered Dr. Perry and his extravagant coffee machine.

Dr. Rich was recommended by my new insurance company. He was free and not too far from me, so why not. I heard good things about him through a mutual friend, so I figured it couldn't hurt. The month and a half long waiting list was not ideal, but I guess that meant he was wanted, which meant he must be good. The wondrous effects of the Wellbutrin had been wearing down the last few months. The blip effect hit my stomach again and I was feeling the sadness rush back. All signs I desperately needed to see someone immediately.

I visited the Emergency Room twice in the last few weeks, because Dr. Rich couldn't get me in any sooner and I couldn't wait any longer. I was crying at all hours of the day, especially when the darkness fell on me at night. I thought about ending it. More than I usually did. I had plans this time. The knife I used to grip so many years ago now seemed like a good option again.

The burgundy plastic chair was annoying the hell out of my ass. I could not get comfortable. My nerves were getting the best of me. My nails were clenched into the under part of the chair as I gripped the seat. My legs were fidgeting. I felt like an addict

waiting for my next fix. It didn't help that the woman next to me brought her five (yes, five!) kids with her and they were running around like idiots.

The waiting room was small enough already. Claustrophobic winds were blowing through my mind. I had already submitted paperwork electronically, so I had nothing to do. His secretary seemed nice though, when I checked in. Nice people are always good signs.

The door opened and a plump older gentleman stood there. He had a creepily pleasant smile etched across his face. His button down white shirt perfectly fit his gut. He had black coke bottle glasses and his medium brown hair was full of volume and slicked back on his head. He looked at a chart in his hand. "Rachel?" his eyes sprawled across the tiny room quickly. "Yes, that's me," I said. I grabbed my purse and headed back to his office. He turned and shook my hand as we walked to the end of the hall.

"It's nice to meet you, Rachel. How are you today? What brings you in?" We made it into his office and I sat on a couch across from his big dark wooden desk. His office was trippy. He had a small bonsai tree growing in the corner. He had a neon sign with lights displayed in the opposite corner. Lots of different Knick knacks were laid out all over the shelves. Is this what an acid trip feels like? If so, I wish I could have seen the 70's.

"Well, I've been having some trouble recently and I'm not sure why. My Wellbutrin is no longer having any effect on me and I was wondering if you could help with that?" He shook his head yes and said he sure could.

"What symptoms are you experiencing exactly?" He was ready to take notes.

“I have had anxiety symptoms, which I’ve never really experienced before. I don’t really feel nervous, but it feels like there is a brick on my chest. I also feel very shaky. My hands have been trembling a lot, which has made it hard for school. I’m a writer. I don’t feel too sad. I have crying spells once in a while and I feel unmotivated at times, but it’s mainly the other symptoms that are bothering me.” I looked at the ground while I said these things. It’s been hard to look people in the eye lately. I think I felt embarrassed it was all happening again.

“Well, Rachel, let me ask you a series of questions so we can get down to the bottom of this.” I shook my head okay. He then asked a series of questions like if I had planned on hurting myself. I said no even though sometimes it was yes. I answered yes to anxiety related questions and some about depression.

“Do you have a nervous feeling in your stomach?” **Yes.**

“Are you dwelling on things?” **Absolutely.**

“Do you have heaviness on your chest?” **All of the time.**

Many more questions followed these and they all fit what I was feeling.

“Well, Rachel, from what I am hearing and seeing you seem to be experiencing a lot of anxiety and a little bit of depression. Not to fret though, I think I have just the thing for you.” He reached in his drawer and pulled out a bright yellow and green pamphlet. “There is a brand new medication out for people like you. It should really help with the anxiety and it also acts as an antidepressant. A lot of my patients are on it and they barely experience any side effects.” No side effects, what is this miracle pill?

“It’s called Rexulti. Do you think you would want to give that a shot?” He looked up from his notepad.

“Yeah, sure. That sounds good.” He handed over a sample pack to me.

“I’m going to give you a four week pack to try. It increases each week so it is a little bit of a slow process, but I want it to get into your system and get you used to it.” Another month of trying to get better, ugh. I guess it would be worth it though if it worked. Hopefully it would. “I want to see you back in a month, okay?”

“Yeah, thank you.”

“Do you have any questions before you leave?” His eyes were caring.

“No, I don’t think so.” I usually researched my pills online anyways when I get home. I would figure it out.

“Okay, well go ahead up front and I’ll see you in a month. If you have any trouble or side effects with it, just call us, okay?” I shook my head yes.

I headed down the hall and went to the front desk. The nice secretary greeted me again. “Okay, Rachel, we will see you in one month. You are all set.” She handed me an appointment card. I thanked her and headed out to my car. My mom was looking for a new psychiatrist to. I called her from the car and told her about the good experience I had with him. I think he might be the right fit for me, finally. I told her she should make an appointment to see him. She called shortly after I got home.

Session two, four weeks later

I felt better but I still didn't feel great. The brick on my chest was still there once in a while. The trembling would meet my fingers every now and again. I figured I would get the chance to talk it out with Dr. Rich at our appointment today. I sat in the same cold burgundy chair in the waiting room. He didn't keep me waiting long. We went down the hallway and I sat on the couch in his office again. Same routine.

"So, Rachel, how are you feeling?" He sat back in his chair and folded his arms across his chest.

"I feel okay I guess. I still have some anxiety symptoms, but I guess things have been a little better." Truth was I didn't care for the medication much, but it's only been a month. Sometimes they could take months to hit the spot; better give it a chance.

"I want to increase the dosage, which could be part of the problem. Why don't we go up one milligram on the Rexulti and see how that goes." He began writing the prescription before I could answer. He must be getting some kickback for promoting this pill so much. That's all he's talked about our two sessions together. He put the prescription note in my hand and I was on my way. Another month to see how things would go. It wasn't the most assuring appointment, but what could we discuss besides what I said.

Two weeks into the new medication I began getting shakier than usual. My skin became irritated. I wanted to crawl out of it. I couldn't get anything done and I couldn't sit still. My body was so restless and I wasn't getting any sleep. I called the nice secretary

and asked if I could be put back on the lower dosage. Dr. Rich said it was okay and to still come in two weeks so we could discuss the next step. I listened as directed.

Third and Final Session, another four weeks later

The whole way there I worked out what I was going to say to him. *Dr. Rich, this medication is making me feel crazier than I am. My body feels so uncomfortable and irritated, I feel sad, even more so than before, and I still can't get the brick off my chest.* I just needed him to know how I was feeling. I let this man gain my trust and I needed his help, desperately.

When I walked into the waiting room, the same woman with the five kids was there again...and so were the little monsters. Great. I walked up to the nice secretary and checked myself in. Nice again, this lady is going for gold over here. I took a seat two chairs down from the woman and waited my turn. My hands were fidgeting again. I always got nervous before meetings with doctors, especially when things weren't working out. Maybe he would give up on me; God knows I have plenty of times before.

The door clicked open and there he stood. "Rachel?" his eyes scanned over the room. Did he not remember me? I raised my right arm a little to gain his attention. "Ah yes, come on in." He didn't even wait for me to get up; he was already walking down the hallway. He reached his office before I even made it halfway down the hall. I closed the door behind me and sat on the couch again. Before he even shut the door, something changed in him. His eyes were glassed over. Was this guy drunk?

"Rachel, I don't understand why you aren't listening to me!" He began shouting at me as he walked over to his desk and had a seat. "You are being noncompliant! Don't you trust me?" I was like a deer caught in headlights.

“What are you talking about? I came to you because I needed help. Of course I trust you! How in the world am I being noncompliant? I’ve done everything you told me to do!” I could feel the veins bulging in my neck. How could a doctor yell at me? This definitely wasn’t good behavior.

“Jessica, I mean Rachel...” He couldn’t even remember my name... “You are showing severe signs of depression. I thought you came to me because you trusted me. You didn’t even give the medicine a chance.” He was flipping through my chart.

“Excuse me! I have done everything you’ve said to do...I’ve taken my medicine as directed. I...” His words cut sharp when he cut me off.

“You have done none of those things. You called my office and complained about the medicine. You aren’t doing what I tell you!” His stare was killing me it was so intense. His eyes were still glazed, I felt like he was looking through me.

“I called your office and asked if I could go on the lower dose. You aren’t even letting me explain anything or how I felt. What is going on here?”

“Well, let’s just have a look at your chart shall we? You went to the Emergency Room twice within 6 weeks and they administered Xanax, which you claimed did nothing for you. You stopped going to your old psychiatrist and now you aren’t listening to my directions. You obviously have a track record.” Was this guy crazy? He was supposed to be helping me. My eyes began to water. I will not cry. I will not cry in front of this monster and let him reap the joy of that.

“First of all, the Xanax DID NOT do anything for me. I called your office to try and meet you sooner and you had no time for me. Secondly, I left my old psychiatrist because I did not have a choice and I turned for you to help and this is how you treat me?”

I obviously take the medicine and listen obediently. Do you think I don't want to get better after all that I've been through?" This guy must be delirious. I was on the verge of killing myself before I met him. Of course, I would listen and did want to get better. He took a deep breath and calmed himself. Something in his eyes changed himself. I don't think I was the one not taking my medication.

"Rachel, I'm sorry I had to get blunt with you, but I need you to follow my orders."

"Like I said, I am." I could barely get out the words. I couldn't look at him. My palms were sweaty. I could feel my nose about to drip as I looked down at my thighs.

"Look, if the Rexulti is bothering you why don't you come back in two weeks and we can talk about it. I have another appointment soon and I don't have time to discuss this now with you." You could have if you didn't start screaming at me, jackass.

"Fine." He went to shake my hand as if he cared. I didn't touch it. "I'll go schedule myself." I still hadn't looked at him. I couldn't tell you the expression he had when I got up and walked out. I walked down the hallway, but I was in a blur. I felt like I was in a bad dream. Why the hell would a doctor conduct himself that way? This is outrageous.

I clicked open the door to the waiting room. A few patients waited in their uncomfortable seats. I hoped they wouldn't have to experience what I just went through. Poor souls. I didn't schedule an appointment. I could hear the secretary asking where I was going as I walked out the door to my car.

As soon as my door shut the tears began to rain from my eyes. I wasn't ashamed or embarrassed, I was mad. I trusted this dick. He was supposed to help me. I needed him

to help me and now I get treated like a damn idiot who can't follow directions on a pill bottle. Now I had to start from scratch all over again. There is no way I would step foot back into that building after that.

I called Brian on my way home. I knew he would comfort me.

"Babe, what's wrong? What happened?" he sounded frantic.

"That lunatic just lost his damn mind on me. He made me feel crazy. I have done everything right. I follow directions! I'm a good person! Why does this keep happening to me?" I could barely see through my tears on the drive home.

"What do you mean he screamed at you? Why would he do that?" he sounded upset.

"I don't know, Bri. He wasn't all there today. I think something is wrong with him. He looked drunk or strung out." I tried to wipe away the snot with my sleeve.

"Babe, don't let it get to you. I don't understand why he would say those things, but you did everything right." The inflection in his voice was soft and soothing. "Are you driving right now?"

"Yes." I was almost on my street. I couldn't wait to get home and tell my mom.

"I'm so sorry this happened to you, babe. What are you going to do now?" he knew my anxiety and depression was bad. He saw me at some weak points. I know he didn't want to see that again.

"I guess I have to start all over again." I felt defeated. "Bri, I'm home. I want to talk to my mom. Can you call me later?"

"Yeah, Rach, sure. I'm sorry this happened. Stay strong, okay. I love you."

“Thanks, babe. Love you too.” I hung up the phone and walked inside. My face was red and burning. It was tear stained and I could feel snot residue just above my lip. My mom was sitting on the couch watching TV.

“Jesus, Rachel, what happened?” She turned the TV off and looked deeply at me.

“My doctor just went nuts on me. He told me I was noncompliant. He was just screaming for no reason. I was terrified. It was like he was trying to punish me for no reason. He couldn’t even get my name right.”

“Oh my God, are you okay? We should report him, that’s terrible.”

“No, mom. I don’t want to report him.” I was leaning against the chair trying to wipe tears from the corner of my eyes.

“But what if he does this to someone else?”

“Mom, I said my peace. I didn’t shake his hand and I’m not going back. That’s enough for me.” I walked around the chair and had a seat. I had to go to work soon. Ugh. I felt like shit. I then turned into a bad patient. I stopped taking the Rexulti, could turkey, which is probably the worst thing you can do. The next five weeks were hell. They were probably the lowest point I ever got to in my life. I wanted to die every day. I guess he was right, I guess I wasn’t listening after all.

Sunny Disposition

The sun slid into my room through my tattered blackout drapes. I used to rise like the sun-warm, slow, and energetic. I don't rise the same way anymore, though I am still slow moving. I do my best to try and keep the light out, but somehow it always finds its way in just a little bit.

They said I was a very happy kid when I was little. I even heard the term "sunny disposition" being thrown around. You know when you hold a buttercup underneath your chin and your face lights up like sunshine; I think that's what I must have looked like my first couple of years. I've seen picture of myself, I have some memories. I remember laughing and smiling, but it feels like it's been forever since that happened.

My face used to glow like the sun, but now it showed darkness like a starless night sky. I was a happy child, full of positivity and hope, but it seems the sunny disposition has been deceptive. I'm now unstable and the color of the sun now represents the Egyptian dead. Yellow is no longer the positive color of my aura. The yellow is faded and I've become a coward. My mental activity is through the roof. I should be laid back, but my brain goes a mile a minute. I'm green with envy of the way I used to be. I think that's why the color that represents me is blue. My faded disposition and envy have mixed together.

Can I have a word?
A collection of shorts

No Filler Here

The man called her plump and he didn't mean it as a compliment from 1350. Her face burned with redness. Her eyes fell to the cracked cement.

Not as harsh, but still seated with the group of *big-boned* and *heavy*. Men don't want a plump woman. I take that back; this man didn't.

Some girls would kill for lips to be. Some pray to have their breasts pretend. She wished someone would look upon the curve of her hip as she did; *sexy*.

Sex appeal shouldn't have a weight limit.

On Monday, she'll thank Carol for the shitty blind date.

Mamihlapinatapai

I ordered another vodka cranberry from the bartender. His anger was released when he mixed my drink in a silver shaker. The drink hit the cherry stained bar. He slid it over to me.

“That will be \$4.50, pretty lady.” He gave me half a smirk. I reached into my wallet to grab some change.

“Hey, this one’s on me. You look like you need it.”

This stranger was handsome. I never had a fine stranger offer to buy me a drink. His black hair, slicked back, shined like an oil spill. He had a nice build; I could tell a chiseled chest was hidden beneath his flannel shirt. My inner thigh began to tingle.

“Uh, thank you, that’s sweet of you. What’s your name?” I took a sip of my free drink.

“Tom. What’s yours, beautiful?” he took my hand into his and gently kissed it. The tingling intensified. I could feel my cheeks growing warmer.

“Rebecca. It’s nice to meet you, Tom. Again, thank you”. I took another sip.

He took a seat beside me. Heat was coming from his body. There was an instant erotic connection between us. I wanted him. I never had sex with a stranger, and I had to admit, it was on the top of my bucket list.

He looked over at me with lust in his eyes. I could tell what he wanted, but we sat there, nervous, like high school kids on an awkward date.

I asked for a shot.

Is this all there is?

When I say he wanted to get into my panties, I didn't mean he wanted to have sex with me. He literally wanted to wear them. I came home one day only to find him staring in the body mirror in our bedroom, red lace v-string slid perfectly up his ass crack.

"Jonathan, what the hell are you doing?" my purse dropped to the ground with a "plunk".

"Hey babe, I, uh, just wanted to see how they felt...they look so comfy." His image stopped dancing from side to side in the mirror. He tried to play it off cool.

Why the fuck would a grown ass man have the need to do this? Jesus, what have I gotten myself into?

"Is there something you need to tell me?" my arms were crossed against my chest. I was dead serious.

"What? No way, I was just playing around. I got bored waiting for you to come home." He slipped one leg out of them at a time.

You could have cleaned up your mess. Dishes were piled high in the sink. But yeah, sure, play with my delicates instead.

"Johnny, it was funny when you danced around in my bra, but seriously, don't do this again." A flashback from the movie *Wayne's World* popped through my head. Yeah, that was definitely only funny when Michael Meyers did it.

"Sorry, Angie, They just smelled like you. I missed you."

"Oh my God, that's kind of gross and creepy, Johnny." Seriously, what the fuck? *Boy, do I know how pick em' or what.* "I was gone for like 8 hours anyways. It's called working." I could tell that burned a little.

"Yeah, Ang, I know. I'm going to find a job soon." His eyes did not meet mine.

“If you say so...now take my damn panties off. You look fucking ridiculous.”

A bunch of Hocus Pocus

Past Life Spell

Remove the chains of time and space

And make my spirit soar.

Let these mortal arms embrace

The life that haunts before.

A psychic once told me I was a witch in a past life (and I totally went for it), because, who doesn't want to be a witch, right? I'd always been in love with learning about witches and spells, and of course a lot of the movies and books that entertained my mind were about them. This thought stuck with me for a while.

Which witch was I though? I don't think I have the goddess quality of Hecate, nor do I have the evilness of The Wicked Witch of the West. I like to think I would have been a mixture of Winifred Sanderson and Ridley Duchannes. They were a bit malicious, deceptive, yet they were humorous. Yeah, that sounds like me.

When I was four years old, the movie *Hocus Pocus* came out. This is when my obsession started and I knew that somehow I was connected to these women who possessed such powers. Bette Midler sang a song called *I Put A Spell on You*, (which she absolutely did). I turned my purple silk shawl from when I was Esmeralda from *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (I'm pretty sure I was a gypsy too), into a cape and would dance in front of my TV. My small finger outstretched to the screen belting "I put a spell on you".

If I were a witch, I'd like to think I would have been burned at the stakes. My evilness wouldn't have earned me my spot there though. I think all of the bridges I've burned and hearts I'd broken would be enough to lose a life over. That was my power after all. Make them love me, break their hearts. I question if that was really my past life, but I guess when a psychic says so, you believe.

Selenophile

The moon howled for me

And I echoed it back.

I was seated on the ground,

Damp grass underneath my fingertips

Sogginess filling in my back jean pockets.

I don't believe in the man in the moon

But I do think my soul resonates there.

She calls to me every night at dusk

Half crescents are nice, but full and glowing

Is when my love really flourishes for her.

If she were a person, I think we'd be friends,

Like, best friends, forever.

She would understand me better than anyone

Because she has a piece of me, she always has.

My mother was in labor with me for 17 hours

I wouldn't peek out until her glow arrived.

I imagine I probably won't die until she is with me either

Need her to live by, need her to love by, need her to die by.

Another night of soggy jeans and restless eyes

I should probably get to bed

I know she'll be here tomorrow.

Same time? I say with a wink as I press myself off the soil

I think I see her wink back. I'll see you tomorrow.

Nyctophilia

The color of the night sky matched the shade of my soul. Both are starless and foggy and empty. Not even the moon could cure the blackness growing inside of me. Like the dilated pupils the eye doctor gives you. Big and bottomless.

I love it though. It calms me. It's when I come alive. Like an animal who hunts its prey at night, it's what I thrive on. I love the moon, but there's something so calm and welcoming about an empty night sky. I can scream and bleed and no one will hear or see me.

The souls can touch me here. It does not frighten me. I feel at home with them, like I belong in the shadows, lingering, waiting for life to come. The sun is not a friend of mine. It brings joy and clarity. I would rather be lost in the haze. I would rather wonder aimlessly, searching for myself the rest of my life.

Dalliance

It wasn't until about three or four months into it that I found out he was married. Part of me was shocked and the other half didn't care. I'd always been a cautious person; always stayed out of trouble. This time I wanted it, I didn't stop. I wanted to get caught. I didn't want to be the girl who broke up a marriage, but from what he told me, it was already over.

There were kids involved though, two in fact. She had cheated on him already, several times, and yet he stayed. Maybe he was in love still or maybe he was desperate to not be alone. The sex was great though; so great that I couldn't walk away from it, not yet.

We met in a parking lot once under a huge beaming lot. Probably wasn't the best spot since a lot went down that night, including me. My bra was off, his pants were down. I had never taken a risk like this. Someone could have seen. I kind of wanted them to.

Another time we messed around in the back room at work. He was my boss after all. They used to have cameras back there, thank God they didn't now. I probably would have been fired on the spot.

She was pregnant again. He was still fucking her. The sex wasn't worth it anymore. This wasn't a long term thing anyways. I couldn't let him do this while she was growing life. They needed to work it out. I quit my job, I left him; we didn't speak anymore.

He texted me a few months later; said he missed me. I asked him if he got a divorce...he said no.

Equanimity

I never thought I would get to this point. I mean, I'm still not completely there, but things are changing. After all these years, they finally found a medication to change my life. I question though why this wasn't discussed sooner.

I could have lived my youth like a normal child. I could have had better relationships. I could have had self esteem and not put myself in dumbass situations. I try to believe everything happens for a reason, but I'm still trying to figure out this one.

I believe God gives us one trying thing in our lives to get over. I believe it shapes us. I didn't expect mine to last fourteen years though. I was mad at him for a long time. In fact, I hated him. I stopped going to church; in fact I still haven't gone back. I'm still getting over it.

My mind has been freed lately. A freeing I thought I would never experience. At night I feel calm in the darkness. Haunting memories no longer linger in my mind, especially not before bed. I can breathe again, a feeling my lungs haven't felt in what seems like forever. I was breathing through a paper bag for years.

I can conduct myself like a normal person. I am a normal person now. What a relief to fit into this world, finally.

Ras-Le-Bol

I had hit a point like this before, but nothing as serious as tonight. I liked to run the rigid knife blade on the webbed skin between my fingers. I liked how it tugged at it. I liked how it almost cut through.

I wondered how it would feel on my wrists, my neck, and my tongue. Funny thing though, I didn't want to die. I just wanted to be done with this. I kept thinking I would wake up each day and it would be over. I woke up today and it still lingered over my head like my own personal rain cloud.

This is more than just a simple irritation. This is more than just being mad at an enemy. There was hatred here. I hated how I no longer lived in my own body. I hated how I had no control over what I said and especially what I thought. God, if only you could see the horrid things that run through my head. Thank God I never said those out loud. It hasn't attacked my brain that hard yet. I hated how I was being kicked out of my own living space.

Its darkness was entangled in my mind. It wrapped its hands around my brain and squeezed for dear life. I didn't recognize myself anymore and I'm pretty sure no one else did either, but they'd never admit that. I wanted to feel it tighten around my neck. I was already having trouble catching my breath every day; why not just end it for me. Stop making me do all the work already.

Monachopsis

Jason just looked like a writer. If you had to guess his profession, it would be very easy. He always wore tight black shirts and skinny jeans. Sometimes he wore a fedora that would cover his oil slick colored hair. Sometimes for class he'd wear a blazer, put his glasses on (just for looks), and carry his raggedy briefcase. If that wasn't enough to make him look like a writer, he had the perfect hand gestures to conduct himself as one. His facial expressions always matched those perfectly. That's why you could tell Jason was a writer.

Kaylee always did a lot of research on her topics. She wanted to make sure everything was right and in order when she produced a story for the Akron Journal. She always knew the ins and outs of things, like she knew the back roads of writing, especially for journalism. These facts, the way she conducted herself, the way she called herself a journalist; this is what made Kaylee a writer.

I carried a notebook and pen inside my purse at all times, though I don't think that counts for anything. I'm creative, I think outside the box. I like to read and I live to write, but when someone asks me, "What do you want to do for a living?" or "What in the world will you do with a writing degree?" I shrug my shoulders to both answer and say, "I guess I want to write." Does that make me a writer? Just because I said I want to write aloud; because I sure don't feel like one.

Ataraxia

Stainless steel bars surrounded my view each day. I was never allowed to step out and fly. I would just dangle above ground from my cage at all hours of the day. It had been almost ten years since I felt the sun against my skin. The darkness ate at my every night. I stayed mostly in the fetal position most of the days.

I tried every day to escape, but the lock would not budge. You are all I've known. You would think someone would have tried to save me. Maybe a parent. Maybe a prince on a white shiny stallion; but they never did. Good thing they didn't. My social skills are shot to shit. I didn't know how to leave you.

One morning I awoke to a chip in the lock. I shoved my thumbnail into the crevice of it and twisted until I heard a click. My nail was bloody and almost broke off, but the pain was worth it, for the freedom I would soon have. It seemed so easy to escape. It seemed almost as easy as it was to get me here.

Dancing with Depression: A Five Part Movement

I Hate the Internet

I saw your profile on match.com one late night while I was lonely and browsing. Your dark crew cut, empty black eyes, and soulless smile caught my interest right away. I had a thing for guys who engulfed the kind of sadness your picture did. I self diagnosed myself with nyctophilia. I had always felt darkness lived inside me, but that was more of a figurative thing. I didn't think it would literally happen. I didn't think that after getting to know you, you would consume my whole being. I lost myself in your huge, overbearing ego.

I thought we would hit it off; I thought your darkness and my light would balance each other out. The scales were tipped in your favor though. The way you said you wanted me, the tone in your voice, meant something more to me. It awoke something animalistic in me I'd never experienced before, but that's not what you meant. You wanted to add me to your collection of souls, and in a way, I wanted you to scoop me up. I thought it would be just what I wanted, to be swaddled in darkness, unable to move or see. I thought I would test the waters, but I ended up drowning instead. Congratulations on your win, but can you please return me to where I belong? It's been fourteen years. Move on. Find your next victim.

I Used to Love the Rain

I saw you sitting there waiting for me

I knew I'd fall for you...

Into you

I was created for you this morning

I blossomed here in the darkness

While the ground cradled me

The rain gives me life

The cloudy starless sky is what I thrive on

Perfect droplets formed my being

Come, drink from me, fall into me

Drown in me.

I'll be your personal puzzle

Only when you put your pieces back together

Will you get out alive.

The rain continues to pour...

I'll only consume more of you...

I don't think you'll survive this storm...

Common Law, Uncommon Interests

They say that seven years together is known as a common law marriage; if you double that, here we are. I didn't think it would last this long. I think I knew that going into this though. Our first date was epically tragic, but I was mesmerized by you. I always went for the wrong guys. The ones that treat you shitty or make you feel worthless. The ones who think it's okay to get in your head and make you feel crazier than you already are. I should have left you then, but your grip was so tight on my arm.

You dragged me out of the bar, my black heels fumbling on the cement. Your large hand slammed against my skull and my head and body were shoved into the backseat of your sweet Mustang you had a sick obsession with. That was the last time anyone saw me; or at least the me they thought they knew.

You didn't let me look back. You didn't give me a chance to speak. You didn't give me a chance to scream or beg for my life. So, here I am. Still stuck with you, so far from home. I tried to make it work for a while; I gave it my best. There was no use though. We weren't a match, we never were, and we never would be. We always argued. Your temper knows no boundaries. My irritability has no leash. We never see eye to eye. I wonder if that has anything to do with the height difference. You tower over me; now you have two ways to make me feel smaller than I am.

I awoke one morning with a white veil draped across my face. Terrified, I jumped right up and shoved it off my face. "What the hell is this?" he was scraping at something in a frying pan on the stove. He looked back at me and smirked, "Good morning, my bride." My heart sank to my stomach and then fought its way all the way up to my throat.

I couldn't breathe, the next four words trickled out slowly and with my breath huffing. "I. Want. A. Divorce."

Please Leave Me

I knew it would be a hard process to leave you. You'd been in my life almost half as long as I've been alive. You are me and I am you, and though I want to leave you, I think you'll always linger in the darkness of my soul. Your face is etched like a tattoo across my heart. Even after you're gone, you'll still be the only one laying claim to it. You will still live and breathe in every crevice of my mind. You are so deeply embedded there, I'm afraid the only way to completely lose you would be an old-fashioned lobotomy. I have to leave you though, because I know you won't be the one to walk away first. You are comfortable here, but I don't want you here anymore. You have consumed enough of my life. Your toxins make it harder and harder to breathe. It's time to go.

Please don't think this is an easy 'good-bye' for me. I will miss you. I'll miss your melancholy, your pessimism, and the darkness you gave to my creative ideas. I won't wake up tomorrow and be happy that you're gone, but maybe I will be happy. I haven't smiled and meant it since the day before we met. You've stolen me. You took my laughter, my youth, my everything. I can't give into you anymore. I was raised to be a strong, independent woman. How did I ever get here with you?

It's time to go though, my dear. I know it won't be easy, but you'll find someone else to latch onto. Break-ups are hard, but they are also where you find yourself. I'm hoping I do soon. Good-bye, my love.

Bittersweet Goodbye

I visited your grave today. I even brought you flowers; blue roses, to show you I still care. It's been almost a year since I laid you to rest, and honestly, I've been okay without you. Better than okay, actually, I've started finding myself after all these years. My love for writing has returned, I don't cry in my bed late at night, I don't spite God for putting you in my life. I've learned to become thankful for what you did to me. You made me see things in a different light and imprinted on my mind. I am who I am because of your horrible self.

You raised me like I was one of your own. You were overly attentive. Your interest in me never swayed. I was your target for so long, and you never missed once. I admit part of me was scared to get rid of you completely. You showed me a side of the world only an unlucky number of people gets to see. I never knew what this Earth was like until I lost you. I'm glad I finally got out from under your grip. You would have consumed the rest of my life. You would have swallowed me whole and I never would have accomplished my dreams, let alone know what one is. Thank you for growing weaker over the years, for if you hadn't, I wouldn't have escaped. I wouldn't have been able to run away.

I have to go now. The next one is waiting for me in the car. Let's see where he takes me.

*Dissecting Depression: Look at it For What it
Really is*

I. Out of Control

I didn't see the black ice through all of the fog

Eyes were squinted through the tinted glass

Hands were clutched on the wheel

Face was way too close to the windshield

The moment I hit you I knew it was over

Car spun out

Silver guard rail banged into the side

Etched into the side of my apple red cobalt

Head flung forward against the hard wheel

Blood dripping down to my lip

Tasted bitter, I kind of liked it.

Spinning out of control

The same way I felt with you

You dug into my side, my brain, my heart

Your black ice froze me over

You were in my blood

Running through my veins

A toxic poison I couldn't suck out

You could have left me alone

Could have let me coast along, without harm

You're out of control.

II. What You Really Mean

From the Latin translation

Depressio

Means to “press down”

That’s exactly what you did.

Pressed down on my esophagus

Unable to breathe

Pressed down on my heart

Unable to feel.

Left footprints on my mind

Unable to think clearly

Stomped on my soul

Unable to be myself.

III. *Recipe For Disaster*

A Dash of Melancholy

A handful of pessimism

A spoonful of a monstrosity

One cup agony

One pint fragile

One liter of hopelessness

One pound of sadness

Blend together in a mixing bowl

Lick the spoon

Let it consume you

It will eat you from the inside out.

IV. Out From Hiding

Not quite a masquerade

But not a costume either

I wore you like a mask

A hiding ground for my tears

I went to take you off

Went to untie you from my face

You stuck like glue against my frail skin

I wanted freedom

You wanted me

I learned to live behind you

Learned to mask my emotions

Learned to stop caring about the world

You stole me

There was something poetic about you

Something hauntingly beautiful

Sometimes I didn't mind your shiny jewels against me

Glue cracked after a few years

Relieved; I was finally free from hiding.

V. *Laying You to Rest*

Darkness, age 28, from within my soul

Passed away today from loneliness.

If you care to visit, he'll be buried in my back yard

Burial will follow at demented cemetery

Visitation is not allowed

For he is gone, and we must cope with that.

Depressio was born in my mind

A solid fourteen years ago

Such a tragedy to see such a young one go

He is survived by his rivals

Happiness,

enlightenment,

flourishing,

lucky,

and unburdened

Doubt no longer lives on

He will not be missed.