

THE POWER OF THE PEN: A MANUSCRIPT OF CREATIVE WRITING

by

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A Signature Honors Project Presented to the

Honors College

East Carolina University

In Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for

Graduation with Honors

by

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May, 2023

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My Signature Honors Project

To fulfil the requirements of this experience, I elected to create a manuscript of my creative writing. Included in the project are two narrative pieces; one fictional short story called “A Hopeless Place” and one nonfiction narrative called “The Universe Inside a Circuit Board.” Both pieces of writing work with the theme of the power of creative writing and are close examinations of the speaker. This topic is a personal one for me, as creative writing has become an integral aspect of my personality since high school and has continued in college, as is discussed in the nonfiction narrative.

To understand the purpose of this manuscript, it is first necessary to understand the role that creative writing plays in my life. The nonfiction narrative shows this well by showing how my life has been intertwined with books and reading from the beginning. Since my mother is a teacher, raising children that grow up to be successful in the classroom was important to her. Because of this, my most vivid childhood memories of those where I am sitting with my parents reading a book together. They are wonderfully happy memories for me and some of the best memories I have of my parents together. Writing the nonfiction narrative served as the main point of inspiration for the fictional short story. Ideally, the manuscript should be read with the narrative coming first and the short story following. With this, the reader can develop a strong understanding of how my inspiration comes from the heart.

The fictional short story, “A Hopeless Place,” is perhaps my favorite piece I have written. The story follows a young man, Conway, who has recently graduated from college and lives alone with his sister, Sydney after moving out of their grandparents’ house, with whom they lived after their parents were killed. Drawing much inspiration from J. D. Salinger’s *The Catcher*

in the Rye, I wrote this story from the perspective of Conway, who is a deeply insecure character and covers his insecurities through his intense scrutiny of the world around him. The bulk of the story is contingent on two things: Conway's relationship with his sister and his longing to return to his first love and high school sweetheart, Kate Williams. With these two motivators, Conway navigates his mind and recalls his relationship with Kate before leaving with Sydney to go find Kate and rekindle their relationship. Above all else, this piece is a story about finding family. Starting college at ECU was a time of loneliness for me as I was the only person from my high school to attend the university. This required that I step out of my comfort zone and make new friends quickly. This placed me in a similar place as Conway since I was alone in the new world I was living in, and I often found myself reminiscing about my friends and relationships from high school. In that respect, Conway serves as a surrogate for my own emotions and struggles as I was leaving high school and starting college. Although many of Conway's beliefs that are expressed throughout the story do not reflect my own in most cases, the truth of his emotions toward the world around him and the people he interacts with are directly impacted by his situation and shows in great detail how feeling removed from the rest of the world can hurt a person in ways that only love can mend.

The two works in this manuscript are not only inspired by one another, they are common in the theme of the importance of creative writing as a form of catharsis. This is my deepest truth and something that I felt is imperative to display who I am and what my experience at ECU and of the Signature Honors Project process has provided for me. Creative writing is not something that I was particularly passionate about until I got to ECU and took Intro to Creative Writing my freshman year. In high school, I found comfort in the ability to express my emotions through writing, but never expected it to be anything that I shared with the world. After taking my first

creative writing course, this perception was flipped on its head. It no longer scared me to share my work with others. Instead, it was the opposite; the idea of publishing my work for people to read is an exciting opportunity that would serve as the perfect bookend to my college experience.

The process for writing this manuscript has been the greatest achievement of my college career. During the semester when I put the most work into completing the manuscript, I was deep in my student teaching internship. This put a lot of pressure on me to complete and dedicate my time and resources to each grew more difficult by the day. However, this also provided me with the strength and accountability that I needed to be the best teacher and writer that I can possibly be. Writing is something that I plan to carry through my professional career as I teach so this was valuable experience for me to have learning how to balance my two passions and successfully meet my potential for each.

As I worked to complete this manuscript, my mentor and I developed a great routine that allowed me both the time and attention to detail necessary to produce my best work and the consistent meetings to discuss edits and revisions made to my work in three rough drafts. For each draft, I had about a month between meetings with my mentor. Since I was neck-deep in my student teaching, this provided me with more than enough time to balance my workloads for each responsibility. I elected to dedicate the workweek to my internship responsibilities and would delegate Saturdays to working on my manuscript. Each weekend, I would address one issue I had gotten feedback from and work for a few hours to correct it. Then, I distributed the revisions to friends and colleagues that were willing to read through the “before” and “after” versions of the story and give me feedback on where they were confused, sections or phrases that they liked and disliked, and areas where I needed to implement more details. The next weekend,

I quickly addressed this feedback, then sent the draft to my mentor for finalized revisions for my work and the process would start over again.

The Universe Inside a Circuit Board

From the day I was born, I was set on a path that has developed into my greatest superpower. At the snap of a finger, I can create an entire universe and everything that lives within it, make people find their true love, experience their worst heartbreak, or solve world hunger. Without a day's worth of practice, I can be the star player on the Houston Astros stepping up to the plate to hit a walk-off home run in the World Series or become a Nobel Prize winning astrophysicist that discovered the first extraterrestrial life. To put it simply, I am a writer.

The foundation for this superpower was equally built by both of my parents. My father has a penchant for writing, particularly poetry, that he developed in high school and college. I am convinced that he deposited his "writing gene" in me, as I was completely unaware that my father possessed the same superpower as me until I was in college. When he learned of my plan to develop a manuscript of my creative writing, his eyes lit up and he showed me everything that he has written and kept over the years. My mother, on the other hand, did more of the heavy lifting in making sure I reached this potential. Anxiety-ridden in anticipation of her first child, she devoured any parenting book she could get her hands on in search of ways to develop my brain as quickly as possible. The consensus was that reading with the child regularly and prompting them to "use their words" during a temper tantrum both helped immensely in developing the child's vocabulary and IQ. Her efforts, compounded with my father's artistic mind, produced a self-appointed writer and self-gratifying future Pulitzer Prize winner.

To be a writer is to be born a reader. "Raising a Kid for Dummies" taught my mother that, if her expectations of me were to be a genius, she needed to read with me every day and be my guiding hand in developing a strong vocabulary. Of course, that is exactly what she wanted so it became a compulsory part of our days together, until I learned to read, to sit down and read a book every day before bed. My favorite books to read were the "David" books written by David Shannon about, what I assume are semi-autobiographical accounts, of a mischievous toddler named David. My favorite of these was *No, David*

which is a vignette of destruction as David goes about a day in the life of a six-year-old. I was mostly attracted to the artwork, as I was still illiterate, but I did not hesitate to chime in when the famous line was uttered, “No, David! No!” Pulling my lips to a gigantic smile, I would scream at the top of my tiny lungs along with my mother and we would share a laugh at the boy’s transgressions.

To be a writer is to study the craft. Once I learned to read, it became the center of my world. Through elementary school, it was a tradition amongst my mother, brother, and myself to visit the local public library during the summers to check out books. I was enamored by history, and still am, and the library had a series of books that were, in the most general sense, a pictorial museum of hundreds of subjects. In true boyish fashion, I was drawn to the ones about wars and ancient weapons. However, with those books, I was required to also check out chapter books to counteract the lack of words and began reading *The Magic Treehouse* and *Junie B. Jones* series. The Magic Treehouse satisfied my obsession with history and Junie B. Jones satisfied, I assume, the mischief-fueled interest I had with *No, David*. I read and reread those collections of books more times than I can count and, thus, my passion for literature was born.

To be a writer is to make mistakes and know that it is never too late to correct them. Middle school arrived and my passion for literature was met with another passion that threatened my future as a writer and reader. Basketball consumed my life in the same way that reading had in my earlier years and quickly became my top priority. School has never been a struggle for me, so it was incredibly easy for me to do my homework before leaving school to go straight to the YMCA in town to play basketball with friends until dinnertime. I was a good player, at least in comparison to the other people living in my little one-stoplight-town. I had spent the months outside of rec league season playing in AAU tournaments all over the state and was pitted against some of the best players in North Carolina. My confidence was at an all-time high and playing for my high school basketball team was well within reach.

The coach for my high school basketball program is a local legend. He led a program that had been mostly irrelevant for thirty years to a state championship in 2003 and the entire town hasn't stopped talking about it since. Known for being a hard-ass, Coach Kelly is a massive but quiet man. When he isn't on the basketball court, he is a gentle giant, though, and never misses an opportunity to greet you and meet your eyes with a smile. My relationship with Coach Kelly came through my childhood church. He and his wife have been attending Fairfield United Methodist for longer than I have been alive, but I had never had much interaction with either of them until my eighth-grade year, when I was offered what would become the beginning of the end to my passion for basketball.

One Sunday morning, I was on my way to my Sunday school classroom at church and was passing Coach Kelly in the hallway. He was bent over a water fountain and stood upright just in time to catch a glimpse of me;

"Mr. McKeown," his voice boomed and echoed throughout the hall.

I stopped dead in my tracks and looked up at him, towering over me by at least five or six inches, "Good morning," I greeted him.

"I hear you're playing some travel ball, how's that been for you?"

Overjoyed at the prospect of impressing the man in charge of picking the basketball team at Trinity High School, I responded, "I've really enjoyed it. It's a challenge I wasn't exactly ready for, but I've come along."

"That's good to hear, son. Speaking of which, you should come run with us sometime. I have a group of guys on the JV team and from the team at the middle school that practices every day and plays in tournaments on the weekends."

It was happening. I was getting the chance I needed to gain some leverage in making the high school team. Without hesitation, I accepted his invitation and began practicing with the team. We were

outperformed by every team we faced, and I hardly saw any time on the court, but I didn't mind it. The important part was that I was displaying my commitment to Coach Kelly and that I had made friends with the team's star player, Will. My confidence soared even higher, and I was ready to get to high school and try out for the team. When that day came, I played my heart out and seemed to impress the coach of the Junior Varsity team. However, the confidence in my athletic skills vanished when I found out I had been cut from the team. I was devastated, but in hindsight, this rejection opened the door for me to refocus my life where I could guarantee success: in the classroom.

As I went through high school, I gave the student-athlete archetype another try with track and field, which I was good at, but didn't enjoy. By that time, I was emerging as a leader in my school's theater program and was excelling in the classroom, so the hole in my life that was filled with sports was now being overtaken by the arts. The more I immersed myself in theater and school, the more evident it became that literature was where I could really make a difference.

To be a writer is to welcome life's epiphanous moments with open arms. What I learned about literature in my days consuming any media related to theater and my English classes changed my perception of a fulfilling existence. I do not need people to know my name or watch me on television to be happy with how things turn out. I can use my talents with theater and writing to create the world where I am the starting point guard for the Boston Celtics or where I am a movie star accepting my first Oscar and realize that the glamor of fame only lasts for as long as I let it. I am fixed in my current position with the only road to fame being decades of working toward the goal only to realize it isn't what I expected it to be. With writing, however, I can do the same in two hours and have the power to start over and choose a new life for myself.

My last two years of high school is when my attraction to creative writing was fully realized and I started several documents on my laptop that I would add to here and there, when my schedule allowed. In those documents I had dozens of hypotheticals, fleshing out how my life would be different if I were a

famous author, a professional athlete, or a high school English teacher. Those hypotheticals were instrumental in my development of my perception of myself and what I wanted to do for the rest of my life. Writing about what kind of teacher I would be illuminated my path to making a difference in the world. I want to be able to have the same effect on students that some of my teachers have had on me.

To be a writer is to find inspiration in the places no one else would dare to look. As college crept closer, the world I had known for seventeen years began to unravel. My senior year of high school was a 180-day nightmare. The Fall semester of that year was almost as perfect as you could ask for. I had gotten a good part-time job at a golf course and was able to dedicate most of my brainpower to my theater troupe. By October, I had gotten my acceptance letters to East Carolina University and UNC Wilmington. They were my safety schools but being invited to the Honors programs for both universities bade well for my pending decision from the University of North Carolina. By Christmas, I had been accepted to the Honors College at ECU but denied admission to UNC. Disappointed in the rejection from my dream college, I accepted my invite to East Carolina, and I was officially a pirate, just like my father. I did not write much in that Fall semester. I had a short story that I had begun working on but, as I added to it, the entropic nature of my brain left the piece a messy and mostly unfinished story. I was incredibly proud of myself, however, for writing what I did and was eager to send it to any of my friends who were willing to read it.

My final semester of high school was, to this day, the strangest few months of my life. I was taking courses online through Randolph Community College and would sit in the media center at school for the first three hours of the day. During that time, I got to be close friends with the girl that I would end up dating throughout the rest of the year and well into the Summer. From January until March, I was thrilled with the direction I was headed. I was happily in a relationship, I no longer had to worry about making sure my grades were where they needed to be since I had already been accepted to the honors program at ECU, and my theater director announced that our Spring musical was going to be Mary Poppins. Auditions for the musical came and went and I was convinced that I would land the leading male

role, Bert. Not long after auditions took place, I had gotten offered a job as a camp counselor for the Summer and that I would start training in late May. Everything had fallen perfectly into place.

To be a writer is to understand the unpredictable nature of the human experience. Everything came to a screeching halt in March of 2019. Graduation and the musical were quickly approaching and my tenure at the golf course was coming to an end. One day, as I was wrapping up my work for the day at the course, I got an email that the cast list had been posted for *Mary Poppins*. I froze in the middle of the driving range and pulled up the list as quickly as I could, and my heart dropped immediately. I hadn't gotten the role of Bert and instead was slotted as George Banks, the aristocratic asshole of a father to the kids being nannied by Mary Poppins. I was heartbroken. Feeling betrayed and snubbed of my moment in the spotlight in my senior year, I finished work and went home. There was still a couple of weeks before we began rehearsals for the show, so I searched for any redeeming factors in Mr. Banks' character. As it turns out, I found the answer I was looking for in the portrayal of the real-life inspiration of the character in the movie, *Saving Mr. Banks*. To put it simply, the character was based on P.L. Travers' own father during her childhood and the story of *Mary Poppins* relies heavily on the development of George Banks' character. Still a bit disappointed with not being given the role of Bert, I was optimistic that I could bring life to Mr. Banks and make his development unignorable by the audience.

As rehearsals got underway for the show, I had to quit my job at the golf course so that I would not be sacrificing rehearsal time for work. My last day of work was incredibly busy, and I was exhausted by the time I had gotten home. I was greeted to the exact scene you would expect from a movie; my mother was sitting on the couch, my father on an ottoman on the other side of the living room, and my brother sitting in the loveseat attached to the ottoman.

"Come sit down for a minute before you shower," my mother said in a serious tone.

Without responding, I sat down slowly on the couch.

“I’m not sure where to begin,” my mother began, already starting to tear up, “Your father made a bad decision.”

For a couple of weeks before this conversation, my father had been taking weekend trips to my grandpa’s house and was spending his nights during the week sleeping on the couch in the living room. I had assumed that there was some sort of disagreement between my parents at first but as his exile from the master bedroom got longer, I knew there was a more serious situation going on.

“So,” my mother swallowed her tears and continued, “He is going to be staying at Papa Bill’s house for a while.”

I was speechless as I had never expected that something of this magnitude would happen. My parents were madly in love for twenty-two years at this point and I saw no end in sight to their marriage, but here it was. Everyone sat in silence for a while and then my mother continued to try and explain as cryptically as she could all the reasons why he was leaving and what our lives will look like going forward. I did not hear much of it, though, I was too busy processing the initial news. After the conversation was over, my brother and I were dismissed, and dad walked out the front door. I spent the rest of that night staring at my ceiling trying to make sense of what had transpired.

I found an escape from my spiraling world in preparing for *Mary Poppins* and the next thing I knew; we were a week away from opening night. That week, Kenzi, the girl I was dating for most of the year decided that she wanted to take a break from our relationship. It wasn’t a full-on break up but was close enough to bring me back to the chaos that had become my life in the previous few weeks. I was deep in my first reading of *The Catcher in the Rye* when this happened and, in the blink of an eye, I transitioned from feeling sorry for Holden Caulfield to relating to him deeply. I was on the brink of my biggest leap toward adulthood and the world I knew was crumbling around me and so I opened my laptop, finally, with something to write about. I began to write at any opportunity I had. I was trading homework to finish up with a particular scene of a story or to write a letter to Kenzi that I would never

give her and, predictably, my grade began to slip. Since I was already accepted to ECU and had my job at camp to look forward to, all I was concerned with was making sure I didn't fail any classes.

To be a writer is to be honest, no matter the situation. As my grades were slipping, I grew increasingly careless in my work and one of my teachers noticed. For how long she had been tracking my decline, I'm not sure, but eventually it had concerned her enough to stop me on the way into class one day, saying,

"Charlie, come eat lunch in my room today." She was a woman of few words, and I respected her for it. I agreed and sat at my desk until the bell rang for everyone to go to lunch all the students got up and left, except for me and a girl that I had known since elementary school who had become close with this teacher and stayed in her room for lunch on most days. The three of us sat on the floor together as we started to eat. Another of my teachers came in and joined our silent picnic and then the silence was broken.

"So, Charlie," began Ms. Bass, the teacher who had invited me to lunch, "I see you've got a new girlfriend."

"Well..." I began to explain the situation with Kenzi but was interrupted.

"Is she the reason your grades aren't doing so hot right now?"

I resisted the implication. Kenzi was not known at Trinity to be a star student. She was perfectly capable of succeeding but couldn't meet her potential because she had to work almost full-time outside of school.

"No, of course not," I responded, "It's just a really busy time with graduation around the corner and the musical coming up..." I trailed off. I was running out of excuses without lamenting the past few weeks to everyone listening.

Ms. Bass saw right through my attempt to avoid the conversation, “You sure?”

I fell silent and kept my eyes fixed on the floor tiles. My brain was going a thousand miles an hour trying to find an good enough answer to avoid further questions.

“Does she need to leave?” She asked, gesturing to the other student in the room.

“No, no. She’s fine. It’s just been a rough time at home recently.”

I had everyone’s undivided attention, their eyes fixed on me and not saying a word in response. I needed to elaborate.

“My dad,” I paused for a moment to find a delicate way to word it, “doesn’t live with us anymore.”

I don’t think it was the answer anyone was expecting, it was quiet for a while. Once the silence was broken, the conversation continued with me describing the situation to the best of my knowledge and then both of my teachers providing me with contingency plans for getting back on track and recovering my grades. It was liberating to talk with them about the situation and invigorated my inspiration for things to write about. I created a new story that thinly veiled the events of that school year, just to download my emotions without having to share it with anyone. That story began what would continue as my main form of therapy when I was down-and-out or even when I was happy with my life and continues to this day, in fact.

A Hopeless Place

My little sister adores me more than anyone in the world. She's only thirteen, so I guess it is just her age. I mean, she looks at me like I hung the damned moon. If she was out running errands with mom and they stopped for ice cream or went to Target for toys, she always came back home with two of whatever she had gotten; one for me and one for her. I can't imagine why, though. I was an awful brother to her growing up; I was never defending her from bullies or getting extra surprises for her. Instead, I would get angry with her and start an argument over the smallest things. Whenever it started getting heated, my mother would break up the fight and take me into my bedroom, sit me down, then give me the same old line,

“You know, one day you are going to regret having argued with your sister so often. There will be a day that she doesn't want to follow you everywhere you go and you're going to miss it. Trust me.”

I notice her often emulating whatever position I happen to be sitting in, just to be like me. In one sense, it's flattering. In another, extremely goddamn annoying. Like today, I was laying on my bed watching TV and her head peeked around the door jamb, her long brown hair cascading down her face, seemingly unphased that the world couldn't see her perfectly hazel eyes.

“What are you doing, Conway?” Her eyes peering through her round-rimmed glasses.

“Nothing.”

“That's impossible.”

“Nothing's impossible,” I could feel her stare burning a hole in the side of my head.

“What are you watching?”

“A documentary.”

She leapt from the door and onto the bed in one swift motion and landed gracefully right beside me.

“Jesus, Syd! What was that for?”

She snuggled her little head into the pillow and put her hands behind her head, just like me.

“What’s your movie about?”

“It’s a documentary,” I corrected her, “about JFK.”

“JFK?” She cocked her head like a puppy when you step on their toy by accident.

“He was the president about fifty years ago, but he got shot and killed.”

Syd shifted uncomfortably on the bed, “I need a snack.”

Walking out of the room, she looked back at me with a slight frown and closed the door behind her. Ever since mom died, she hates anything that looks or even sounds remotely like a gun. That look from Syd really hit me. Just because I don’t have an issue with grief, doesn’t mean I don’t get fucked by my other emotions. It’s like when someone goes blind or deaf or something and their other senses shift into overdrive to compensate. I paused the movie and walked out into the kitchen, leaning against the door jamb.

“Hey, what are you making?”

Sydney kept her eyes fixed on the countertop.

“Syd?”

“PB and J.” A snuffle came from her button nose.

“Sounds good. Want to make me one?”

A brief silence fell between us as I watched her close her sandwich.

“Okay. I’ll bring it to you when I’m done.”

No matter how badly I hurt her feelings, she would never pass up on an opportunity to make me happy in return.

Five years ago, our mother was killed during a bank robbery. Shot dead for no good reason. I got asked every single day why I wasn’t ‘sad’ or some other annoying synonym over her death, and I never knew what to tell them. I mean, it’s not like I wasn’t upset, it’s just not anyone’s goddamn business what’s going on in my head, you know? It’s not even *my* goddamn business. People would ramble on about how I’m “not handling my grief healthily” or that I “need counseling” and I say fuck them. When it comes to being sad, I feel it for a day and then I find something that distracts me, and the feeling dissipates. That’s the best way I know to explain it. Point being, it is my current hypothesis that our mother’s death is a major reason why Sydney is so obsessed with me.

A few weeks after mom’s funeral, Dad fell off the wagon. Knocked his head really fucking hard and was never the same again. I know how weird that may sound, believe me, it wouldn’t be the first time I’ve gotten a twisted look when I said it. Dad was a huge historian. He loved to go to war reenactments in the next town over just so he could see what the war “might have looked like.” The day that wagon wheel got the best of him, he had finally gotten on the roster to be one of the actors in a Revolutionary War reenactment of the battles of Lexington and Concord and his job was to drive a horse-drawn wagon to give the American militia their guns. He got to his big moment, stepped up on the wagon to pull out the boxes, some kid threw a little pebble at the horses and scared the hell out of them. He lost his balance when the horses went crazy and hit his head on the ground, knocking him out cold. At first everyone laughed, including me, I was always a sucker for a good bit of physical humor in movies. When he didn’t get up and an ambulance drove through the middle of 1775, it wasn’t so funny anymore. He was rushed to the hospital and stayed there for a few days, an embolism formed in his brain, and it killed him. For a

while, I blamed Dad for killing himself. I never understood how he couldn't keep his balance or why he didn't just jump from the wagon to pull those guns from the back. If he could have lived to fall again, I'm sure he would've at least worn a helmet.

After our parents died, Syd and I moved in with our grandparents, on Dad's side, and the government cut a pretty big check for both life insurance policies. Since Mom didn't have much of a relationship with her parents and my dad's had enough money already, once I turned eighteen, all the inheritance was going to be mine. As soon as that happened, my grandma and I were swarmed by a bunch of sleazy lawyers trying to weasel their way into my bank account and salvage as much as they could for themselves. Ultimately, we were allowed to keep everything without much trouble, but decided to get some help with selling the house because who the hell wants to live in their dead parents' home? All the paperwork and decisions really gave us a mighty uppercut, so we had to get some help from a family friend who works as a financial advisor, luckily enough. One of the first things she told us was that the mortgage on the house was probably a little too high to keep, anyway, so she listed and sold it pretty quickly. Ever since then, money has not really been an issue for me and Syd, but it won't be too long before I need to buckle down and find a job.

There was a time when Mom's death really bothered me. I couldn't blame her death on her own decisions like I could with Dad. I got pretty upset over the whole situation and started to lose sight of myself a little bit, even. The principal of my high school pulled me out of class one day to meet with the school psychologist to talk about what was going on in my life because my grades had taken a nosedive. She told me to keep a journal of my feelings and to write in it every day. On Fridays, I would give her my journal and we would meet before school on Mondays to discuss what I had journaled. Being so realistic with my journal entries was uncomfortable, so I started turning each entry into stories to try and hide the

emotionality. That's what really helped me. The shrink didn't really understand what I was doing but I was showing improvement, I guess, and my grades were going back up, so she just let it go.

Having written those journals, I began to love writing for the break that it gave me from obsessing over my dead parents. I took a journalism class to make writing a sure thing during my days at school. There was a girl in the class that I'd had a major crush on since elementary school. Her name was Kate Williams. Since the first day I met her, I knew I wanted to marry her. On the first day of school that year, she was sitting at the middle desk in the front row, when I walked in the room, all I could see was her beautiful blonde hair as she was digging in her bookbag for a pencil. When she sat up, she was staring right at me with eyes as green as grass in Spring. I froze for a moment, our eyes locked on each other. Her cheeks turned bright red, and she almost gave herself whiplash with how quickly she turned away. I took the desk behind hers, but only because I was late, and it was the only chair left. As the semester went on, we became good friends, and were virtually inseparable. We were also undoubtedly the best writers in the class and were always the students that had their work used as examples for the rest of the class. She would invite me to her house every week to work on our articles, but we never got much work done, spending our time joking and laughing with one another.

Kate was equally as passionate about writing as I am, it's what I loved most about her. She was the only person on the planet that I was comfortable sharing my writing with and she was grateful for it. She understood that tortured artist cliché that I would abuse so that people would feel badly for me, but she didn't fall for it. We would sit and read letters that we had written to one another, passages that we were proud of, or ones that we couldn't find the right words to complete. We would find those words and the world would fall away for a while, leaving just the two of us deep in a void of writer's block and sentence fragments but also swimming in an ocean of passion for writing and for each other. Even though we so obviously liked one another, I was always too nervous to ask her on a date and she was the type to

require that the man always make the first move. I guess she got tired of waiting for me to stop fearing rejection and she interrupted me while I was brainstorming introductions to my article for that week,

“Conway, hang on a sec,” she blurted, shaking her head.

I froze and met her eyes but didn’t say anything.

“What do you think of me?”

It was a strange question, and I didn’t pick up on what she was implying, “What do you mean?”

She laughed nervously and rubbed the back of her neck, “You like me, don’t you?”

“Yeah, of course. I love getting together like this and working on our assignments.”

“Okay,” she paused for a moment, “but do you *like* me?” She took a deep breath, “Because I like you.”

A boulder dropped into my stomach and my face started to burn, “Yes, I do.”

“Then why haven’t you asked me on a date yet?”

“I guess I just...I don’t know,” my voice trailed off and I started scribbling nervously on a sheet of notebook paper.

Kate grabbed my hand and pulled the pencil from my fingers, holding it by her face with a disapproving look.

This time, I understood the implication and straightened up, “Because I didn’t want to hear you say no.”

“I’m not going to say no.”

I conjured every ounce of confidence I had and asked her on a date. Our plan was to go to the basketball game after school on Friday and have dinner afterward at the little Mexican joint downtown. I still had no idea what to write for my introduction, but I didn't care. All I could think about was what had just happened, so I went home.

The following Thursday, and the day before my date with Kate, was the one-week anniversary of dad's accident. I told my grandma that I was going to stay late after school the next day to watch the basketball game. My grandma lost her shit when I told her, though.

"Your father just died and the only thing on your mind is basketball?"

"I never said I wasn't thinking about him dying." I started to walk back to my room.

"Well, if you were thinking about him, you'd be asking me how to help plan the funeral." My grandma took a step toward me.

"You think I want to help plan my own father's goddamn funeral?"

"You think I want to plan my own son's funeral?"

"Jesus, okay fine. How can I help?"

"No, you know what? Just get out of this kitchen before I lose it."

So, I did. I went to my room, locked the door behind me, and didn't come out until it was time for the game. The last thing I needed in that moment was for Syd to come waltzing in offering me a sandwich or something.

Our school lost the game. It was ugly. I met Kate out in the parking lot of the gym, and we got in her car to go to dinner. I couldn't drive yet so she had to, it was emasculating. Of course, I was a perfect

gentleman for dinner. I ate ribs, they were fucking delicious. After we finished eating, I paid, and we sat at the table for an hour talking to each other. It was perfect, like a scene from those cheesy romance novels that those insufferable middle-aged housewives devour. Mom used to read them constantly too, I think she probably kept some of those authors from losing their houses.

“So—umm—did you enjoy the game?”

Hey, no one said I was a smooth conversationalist. I’m not goddamn Holden Caulfield.

“I mean, yeah. I didn’t really watch it, there wasn’t much to see,” a small grin drew from the corner of her mouth. “I spent most of the game out in the foyer with my friends.”

“For sure, it wasn’t pretty.”

We sat in silence for a minute. God, it was painful, my mind started to wander, and it locked in on the argument with my grandma, dad’s funeral, the awful timing of it all, and Syd sitting alone in her room, just waiting for me to get home. I was punching my thigh under the table because someone had to be punished for this crime against decent conversation.

“Tell me about your family,” I finally broke the ice.

“What do you want to know?”

“Everything, but start small,” I had read somewhere that girls like it when you show direct interest in their lives.

“Alright, yeah. My mom is a teacher, and my dad owns that little coffee shop by the movie theater. I’m an only child, so I get lonely.”

For a second, I was jealous of her being an only child. No one there to ask questions when you’re trying to watch something on TV, ask you for help on homework when your parents don’t know the

answers, or to invite themselves to baseball games and shopping trips when your parents ask you to go. If I were an only child, though, I'm sure I'd be thinking the opposite, that's what mom would say.

“Is that why you wanted to come to the game tonight?”

She shifted uncomfortably in her chair and gave a cute little nervous laugh, “Yeah, I guess you could say that.”

“Well, why else would you go?”

“I don't know. Go Vikings, I guess,” she giggled again.

I knew that the only reason she had come to the game was because I had asked her if she wanted to go out afterward, but I wanted to hear her say it.

“You guess?” I teased.

“I told you; I had a couple of friends that went.”

“So why didn't you ever go to any of the football games then? I always ran into at least five of your friends every time I went.”

“I don't know, the mood just struck me, I guess.”

I was getting closer; I could feel it. The more I interrogated, the more her glowing green eyes moved around desperately for something else to look at that wasn't me. Her fingers began twiddling a straw wrapper and folding it into the smallest little ball you've ever seen. Her legs began to bounce against the table, shaking it ever so slightly.

“They asked you to come?” I asked.

“Not exactly.”

“Man, some friends they must be, huh?”

“They have their moments,” her giggle came back a little more shakily.

“If they didn’t ask you to come, why did you?”

I could almost hear her heart beating in her chest. She fell silent.

She took a deep breath, “Alright, you got me, I came because you and I had made plans for after.”

I couldn’t help but smile. I mean, who wouldn’t? The girl of my dreams came to a game that she couldn’t give a shit about, only because I had asked her out to dinner. It was funny, that date. The longer we talked and the more we got to know each other, everything else in the world just disappeared. It was just the two of us, two lonely souls in an empty room. We left the restaurant and she drove me back to my grandma’s house. She walked me to the front door, we hugged but didn’t kiss. I told her that I had a great time and went inside and straight to bed.

My first kiss with Kate wasn’t long after that date, though. It was the most out of character night of my life. It was a few days, maybe a week later. On a whim, I drove out to her house, just to have someone to talk to. As much as I love Sydney, she doesn’t always give the best feedback when I want to talk about my day or some shit. I knocked on her door and she answered.

“Conway?”

“Yeah, you want to go for a drive?”

“My parents are already asleep, if I leave and they find out I’ll never see the light of day again.”

“Can I come in then? I just want to talk to you.” My leg was shaking, and my fingers wouldn’t sit still.

“Let’s sit on the porch.”

I went and sat on one of the old metal chairs that were resting to the right of the doorway, and she followed.

“What’s bothering you?” Her eyes got all big and sorry looking. It was beautiful.

I had no idea of what was bothering me, I just wanted to be with her. She made me calm. I tried to think of something just to break the silence, but I couldn’t do it.

“Fuck it,” I said, and I kissed her. My stomach was doing somersaults and my heart was racing and then she started to kiss me back. We stayed there for a while and finally pulled away.

For the next few weeks, we developed a habit of seeing each other after the rest of the town was asleep. Her parents caught us talking on the porch one night and were livid. They sent me home and Kate was grounded for a few days. My grandma found out what had happened and confronted me about it the next day after dinner. It was a particularly nasty fight, she kept saying that I was the most disobedient child she had ever met. I tried to defend myself, saying that sneaking out for an hour or two every now and then is hardly the same as leaving every night doing drugs or drinking. She got fed up with the argument, so she sent me to my room, and I obliged. After she had gone to bed, I was still awake. I was fuming with anger and couldn’t stand to be in that house any longer, so I packed a suitcase with just enough clothes for the weekend and went straight to Kate’s. I planted myself in the chair on her front porch and texted her asking her to come outside. The front door opened slowly, and Kate slid through onto the porch, closing it carefully behind her.

“You want to run away for a while?” I was almost crying.

“What? No, Conway, I can’t just leave.”

I knew that she wouldn’t say yes. The minute I asked, I knew it would take some convincing.

“I can’t stand living in this town anymore, seeing the same people every goddamn day. It’s poisonous, it really is. I need to get away.” My eyes were burning from trying to hold in my tears.

“Then leave, what’s stopping you?” Kate looked concerned.

“You. If I never come back and you didn’t come with me, I’d never forgive myself.”

“Conway, I care about you, but I can’t just disappear on a whim, and neither can you!”

“Why the fuck not?” She was starting to get on my nerves with all her logical thinking.

“People will worry about you. People love you”

“They sure have a jaded way of showing it, don’t they?”

She sighed, “No, you just have a jaded way of viewing it.”

“Pack a bag. It’ll only be for a couple days. I’ve already got it all worked out. We’ll stay in a hotel room and just be with each other for a while, it’ll be great.”

She looked at me long and hard. She was trying to get a read on me, and I wasn’t going to let her. We remained in our psychological standoff for a while until she gave in and packed her bag. She left a note on her door saying that she was staying the night at a friend’s house. Her parents wouldn’t question it, she promised me.

We got to the hotel and had a wonderful couple of days. We partied, just the two of us. You would have sworn it were something out of a movie. We danced across the floor of our room and drank the entire minibar. I had reserved the hotel on my grandpa’s credit card so we could have alcohol. When we went to bed, she fell asleep as soon as her head hit the pillow. My brain had other ideas. At first, it was no different than any other night. I was running through the day in my head and thinking of funny little scenarios of what could’ve gone differently. After that, the room started to shake and my palms and the soles of my feet started to sweat profusely, my hair stood up on the back of my neck, and my breathing

got faster and less stable by the second. I had to get out of there, but I was paralyzed. My muscles had forgotten how to do their job and I was truly freaking out.

Finally, I pushed myself out of bed and, somehow, Kate didn't lose a wink of sleep. I grabbed the room key and stepped into the hallway. With each step that I took down the corridor, twice the distance was built in front of me. By the elevator sat a little table with two chairs on either side and I sat down heavily. Trying to recapture my breath, I stared up and watched the popcorn ceilings swirl and dance in circles over me. My breathing slowed and I looked down. My body was still quivering, you would've thought that it was negative ten in the damned place. I started to sob as I laid my head on the table. I was confused and scared. I'd never done anything like this before. I had never wanted to escape my life like this before, it was truly terrifying. I pulled myself together and went back to the room. Kate was still snoring up a storm when I returned. I watched her sleep for a while with a little grin on my face. It's comforting to just sit and watch someone you love sleep for a while. I watched her chest rise and fall with each careful breath until I grew weary of being awake. I slept like a rock that night, all I needed was to tire myself out with a nightmarish experience.

Kate went to college after we graduated. She wanted to study journalism since she had such a knack for writing. We shared that skill; the only difference was that I didn't need anyone else's input on how I should write. That, and I wasn't about to let some half-baked teacher's assistant ruin the only thing in my life that provides any sense of stability, outside of Sydney. Kate tried hard to get me to go to college before we graduated. She gave me all the same lines I had gotten from everyone else. I hate that shit.

She said, "Conway, college is the only way to make it in the world, you've got to go."

"Says who?" I avoided eye contact.

"Stephen Hawking and Albert Einstein both went to college, didn't they? And they're the smartest people in history!"

I looked to the ground and shook my head in disagreement.

“You know what, fuck this. There’s no getting through your thick goddamn skull,” she stood up and started to storm off.

I cut her off mid-stomp, “Why do you want me to go to college so badly?”

“So that you can make a decent living,” she was avoiding eye contact now.

“No, I know why you think I *need* to go to college, but why do you *want* me to go to college?”

She paused for a moment. You could almost see the gears turning in her head as if juggling whether to admit something to me, “I’m afraid of losing you.”

My heart dropped into my shoes. She had never said anything like that to me before, so heartfelt, “What on God’s green Earth makes you think that you’ll lose me if you go to college?”

She stared at the ground and shook her head.

I stood from my chair and walked behind her, placing my hands on either side of her waist, “When you go to college, I will come and visit you every weekend. Like nothing ever changed,” I kissed her neck gently.

“What if you decide you don’t feel the same way about me anymore when I don’t live five minutes away?”

“That is the most ridiculous thing I have ever heard come out of your mouth.”

“I don’t know, Conway. I’m scared.”

“Aren’t we all? We live in a world where the people we love most can be taken away in the blink of an eye. That doesn’t mean that we should live our lives afraid of who’s going to leave next. The only

thing we can do is try our hardest to keep the special ones as close as we can for as long as we can stand it.”

Kate looked up at me with the saddest look I’ve seen in my life. She turned around and wrapped her arms around my chest, burying her face into my shoulder as she began to sob. I rested my head on hers and pulled her so close that she may as well have become a part of me. Tears began to fall from my eyes as we stood there.

Finally, I broke the silence, “I don’t want to be naïve. We are adults and can think through this rationally.”

“You’re right, but it’s gonna hurt like hell,” Kate said through tears and sniffles.

“Even if it does, who’s to say that I won’t come back and get you some day?”

“Who’s to say you will?”

“I love you Kate, more than I’ve loved anyone in a very long time. You will stay at the front of my mind from now to the day I get you back and forever after that.”

I had never told her that before, ‘I love you.’ It doesn’t mean that I didn’t mean it, though. I was afraid of how she would react, considering we had only been together for a few months at that point. It was true, though, I loved her so much. She had shown me in just a few months that happiness and genuine affection was possible for someone as fucked up as I am. Aside from Sydney, no one had told me that they loved me in probably three or four years. My grandmother would say it too, but only after we had fought, I guess to maintain the relationship.

Kate looked down at her feet, “I love you too.”

I’m not sure that you can label what Kate and I had as love, though. High school relationships are funny in that way. You want to be grown up so badly that you do all the things that you think grown-ups

should be doing and it hardly ever ends well. With Kate, I think that we found each other at the time when we most needed a shoulder to cry on. I was a shell of a teenager, drowning from the loss of my parents and blinded by the uncertainty of my future. Kate was struggling to carry the weight of making sure she had the perfect resume to go to college and pursue journalism. I must have told her a thousand times that journalism was where writers go to die but she was insistent that it was her jumping off point to becoming an author. Kate's parents put a lot of pressure on her to go to college to the point that she would come to me in tears over the fact that she couldn't be a kid anymore. She was spending every weekend volunteering at the food pantry and picking up trash from the side of the road, all to try and prove to some loser in an admissions office that she was a philanthropist. Honestly, it made me a little bit glad that my parents were dead and couldn't force me into that cookie cutter of supposed success. When we met, Kate and I were two kids that were facing, for the first time in our lives, the bleak reality of insignificance and only had each other to lean on. Even if I wasn't in love with Kate, our time together was too special to forget.

On my eighteenth birthday, I signed the paperwork to make me Sydney's legal guardian and to have the inheritance money moved into my bank account. I moved us into a little apartment a few blocks away from grandpa and grandma's place. I really wasn't in a hurry to move away from my grandparents, I mean, I love them to death, and I know that they are more than capable of giving the two of us a great life, but I didn't want or need to rely on my grandparents anymore and the way to do that was to get my own place. I had the apartment picked out and all I needed was for Sydney to become my problem, and my problem only. I would've left without her, but I need her in my life more than anything else. I would die tomorrow if she left me tonight. Sure, she annoys me, but that's what makes me love having her as my sister more than anything else. She was officially my problem, and we took on our new life together.

When I woke up the other day, it was already eighty degrees outside, which is about typical for the end of June, I guess. I could hear the children that live in the building screaming and racing to the pool to celebrate their lack of responsibility and not having school for the next two months. I, on the other hand, was lying in bed trying to force myself up. I do this often. If I don't get up within the first hour of opening my eyes, I doom myself to lying there all day. I'll sit there and play on my phone or just stretch around until the blood starts pumping. Today, though, I opened my eyes, rolled onto my back, and stared at the ceiling. The apartment has popcorn ceilings, I hate them. The shadows that are projected from light hitting the little bumps of God-knows-what look a little like craters. It trips me out sometimes. I started thinking about how that must be what it looks like on the moon, all those bumps and divots from meteors and shit.

Whenever I was young and would get sick, my mom would come and lay with me in my bed, and we would try and find shapes in the ceiling pattern. It was like cloud watching. I loved every second of it. Trying to do it now is just depressing since I'm not as creative as I used to be, at least in that sense. Where I used to see a knight in shining armor swinging his sword to the gut of a massive dragon, I now see indications of cheap construction. In moments like these, there is absolutely nothing that I wouldn't give to get back to the days when my biggest responsibility was to save my backyard from aliens in time to make it inside for meatloaf and mashed potatoes.

I finally got myself up and went to the kitchen to brew a pot of coffee. Syd and I have this wonderful routine where we sit down together every morning and have a cup or two of piping-hot coffee and just talk and laugh together and it's the most pure and joyful half-hour of my day. That steaming mug sitting in front of her makes me forget that she is only thirteen for a minute and I think it does the same for her. She started drinking coffee when we moved in together. Grandma would never let her drink it, but I was allowed. On the first morning in our new place, I made myself a pot of coffee and Sydney, imitating me as she always does, poured a cup and I didn't stop her. With each sip she took, she grimaced at its

bitterness, but she powered through and finished it before I had even drunk half of mine. She can't get enough of it now and it's been our little tradition ever since.

The smell of coffee had filled the apartment and if that isn't the most goddamn beautiful smell in the world, I don't know what is. Sydney glided from her room like she'd been up for six hours. I don't know how she does it. I knew for a fact that she hadn't been up any longer than I had because she always turns on her radio as soon as she opens her eyes. I poured her a cup and then one for myself. I always serve her first, so she never gets any less than I do. She deserves it more than me. I know that sounds cheesy, but she really does. She always makes me smile, but I can't let myself tell her that, so I make sure that she's never hungry or caffeine deprived. Hell, I even buy her newer, name brand clothes and I shop at the fucking Goodwill. People tell me that it's a reflection of how I see myself or some other pseudo psychiatry so they can fuel their superiority complex, but I just really love my sister and we've been through a lot in the past few years, so why not spoil her a little bit?

"Conway?" Sydney broke our silence over her first sip of coffee.

"Yeah?" I was turned around, doing the dishes while my cup cooled.

"Do you—" She always stammers when she gets nervous, but I've learned to never pry anything from her. "What are you doing today?"

"Nothing, really. I've got a few errands to run this morning, but it won't take more than an hour or two."

"Oh, okay."

"You can come with me if you want, I could use the company."

She lit up like a fucking Christmas tree, "I would love to!"

I didn't need the company, but she did, that's why I offered. She's a lot more like me than either of us would care to admit. The only difference with her is, she wants to talk about her feelings once she builds the confidence. There was something bothering her, and she wanted me to know it.

"Let's finish our coffee and then we can head out," I said, with a half-grin on my face.

After I finished the dishes, I wiped my hands on the little towel draped over the oven door handle and picked up my mug. I sat down and we finished our morning ritual together, draining our mugs, then left to run my errands.

For Christmas, the year before mom was killed, Dad took Syd and I to make mugs at this little pottery place downtown. They looked like hell, but what could you expect? I was a hormonal thirteen-year-old, and Syd was just eight, she barely knew how to use her fingers for anything except for writing and holding shit. When we gave them to mom as our gifts on Christmas morning, she started to cry. Tears of joy, of course. She never even used the mugs, they just sat in the china cabinet as if they were meant to be in the Smithsonian. After she died, Dad gave the mugs to us to have in our rooms as some sort of memento or something. I use that mug every day now. Not because it has sentimental value or anything, it's just a damned good mug, and I made it myself. I'm proud of that mug.

Overstimulated from the errands with Syd, I went to my room and closed the door. After a while of letting my brain dig up anything it wanted, I recounted my time with Kate. Every kiss, every dinner, everything. That's sort of how I process my emotions, I guess. I beat myself to death with every possible place that I could have made a better decision but chose the easy way out. Typically, this is a feeling that I can shake after a while because I get emotionally drained. In some cases, like this one, the emotions are too much and that is when I write. My catharsis is thinly veiling my emotions and downloading any

insecurities into a world beyond the one I'm living in. The best part about it all, though, is that no one else needs to know that world exists, if I don't want them to. It can stay tucked away in a folder deep in my laptop, never to be read by anyone ever again.

Overcome with emotion, it was time to write, so I sat at my desk, which was situated in the back corner of my room. It's a modest little work desk that I picked up from the Salvation Army one day when I briefly considered doing online college. It's made of that fake wood that is just a piece of particleboard with some sort of plastic covering over the top with black metal legs and it shakes violently anytime you brush against it. As shitty as it is, it's mine and I sit at it and write maybe once or twice every two weeks or so.

I closed my laptop after a couple hours of writing and walked back into the kitchen and started cleaning up a little bit, since there was nothing else that needed to be done. Sydney came out of her room, with those big doe eyes and I knew she had me figured out.

“What were you doing in there?”

“Oh, nothing important. Just mulling hypotheticals.”

She read me like a book, “Well, you were in there for a long time, must've been a big hypothetical.”

“Syd, it's really not a big deal. You know how I get sometimes, the lid comes loose a little bit, but I fasten it back down, real tight. I promise.”

She always wants me to promise her that I'm doing well, even if I'm not. It's a strange sort of interrogation, but it does help me feel a little bit better sometimes.

That's another thing that people tell me is an issue of mine since mom and dad died. I keep my emotions on a high shelf. Out of sight, out of mind. Whenever I would run into one of mom's coworkers

or one of dad's drinking buddies at the grocery store or someplace, they would try and dive into my brain. God damn it was annoying.

"Are you and your sister holding up alright?"

"Oh, yes. Just fine. We're in this together, you know?" I have always hated pandering to strangers to make them feel like they accomplished something.

"Wonderful! Have you been seeing a therapist? You seem to be handling it all very well."

"Nope, too expensive. It just hasn't really bothered me much."

That line, my God. People hated it, they probably thought I was a sociopath. To be honest, I liked to see the enthusiasm leave their eyes when I dropped that bomb on them. Just to let them know that I'm holding all the cards in the conversation.

"It hasn't, how?"

"Couldn't tell you."

"Have you talked to anyone about it?"

"Nope, just figured if I don't want to hear their problems, why would they want to hear mine?"

"Conway, that's not healthy! That's going to catch up to you one day."

"So is butter and lard, but I'm not sacrificing grandma's cooking in the name of health, am I?"

This is usually where people get uncomfortable and leave.

This morning, I was standing in the kitchen with Sydney perched on a barstool across from me. Our conversation had died sooner than it usually does but neither of us had realized it. I was distracted

and my mind wouldn't let me refocus and my eyes were cemented to the coffee jostling in my mug. Syd had occupied herself with breakfast, two slices of toast with grape jelly on top. I finally broke my gaze and the silence with a long sigh and said,

“It’s all just a pipe dream, Syd.” I took a long swig of coffee.

“What are you talking about?”

I walked over and sat at the barstool beside hers, “Leaving. Packing all our shit and going to find Kate.”

“Come on Conway, why do you have to think about stuff like that? You always want to get up and leave and never come back,” Syd sat up straight.

“I don’t know, I think I love Kate. I can’t just let her go.”

“You don’t think that you can find a new girl who is just as good or better?”

“Don’t be ridiculous. You can’t beat perfect, Syd.”

“How do you know that she’s perfect?”

She was right. There wasn't an ounce of my being that wanted to admit it, but she was right. I froze for a moment. I had no response. I knew how I wanted to respond, I wanted to explain how, with Kate, I could just look at her face and be filled with an unspeakable joy. I could be completely and utterly myself in her presence without worrying about being scrutinized or criticized. She made my life bearable. She made me laugh when I wanted to cry and walk away when I wanted to fight. She taught me that it is okay to cry during sad movies and dance in the rain. She reminded me what it was like to be a kid again. No responsibilities, no guilt, and no shame.

“You’ll know one day; it’ll all make sense. I promise,” forced itself from my lips, I finished my coffee and stood up, saying, “Let’s go.”

Sydney looked confused, “Go where?”

“Pack a bag with a week’s worth of clothes and whatever else you need and meet me in the car,”

It was happening. I was going to get Kate.

We had been driving for probably an hour and a half before either of us said a word. It wasn’t an awkward silence, just comfortable, the same silence that had filled the apartment when neither of us felt like talking. Just basking in each other’s presence. Syd was usually the first one to break the silence. She loves to talk; most of the time it seems like she’s just talking through her brain’s narrations. It’s sweet, really. She’ll talk for hours about something that happened at school or while she was with a friend. She never bothered me about boys, she knew I wouldn’t have anything good to say, I hate the mushy shit, even if it’s mine. That’s why I didn’t explain where exactly we were going. It would have started a whole other conversation and Sydney would have convinced me not to go through with it so I didn’t give her the chance.

“If deforestation is such a big deal, why are there so many trees alongside the highways?” Syd had her head resting against the window.

“The Earth is really fucking big.”

“I know, but there’s a ton of trees in the world, I see them every day.”

“You’ve never left the country, go to Africa or South America and tell me there are just as many trees there as there are here.”

“Why can’t people just plant a tree to replace the one that they cut down?”

“They can, they just don’t.”

“Why not?” Syd’s face twisted into a sort of dying puppy look.

“They’re more concerned with making money than they are protecting the planet.”

“If they’re using wood, wouldn’t replanting the trees to harvest later just be better for them than just going off to find new trees?” Her eyes narrowed.

“Sure, but what happens when they cut them all down and the ones that they’ve replanted aren’t mature enough?”

“Just wait, at that point, there’s no way that they haven’t made enough money to take a quick break until the other trees are ready.”

“Trees grow really fucking slow, the fastest ones mature in about 20 years. Why are you so worried about deforestation?”

The look on her face softened, “I don’t know. People are just making it seem like a big deal.”

In the silence following that conversation, I realized something. I can’t expect this trip to go exactly how I was picturing it in my head. It’s entirely possible that Kate will open her door with her new boyfriend laying on the bed. She could slam the door in my face for not coming sooner. She could just not be there at all. She could have driven home to come and do the same thing for me. Life is not a book or a movie. I can’t just make things happen because they make sense. I may think that Kate is my soulmate, but there is nothing that says that she still feels the same way she did before. I mean, it’s more likely that she has moved on after not seeing me for an entire year than it is that she has obsessed over when I am coming back, like I have for her. She isn’t constantly reminded of the things we had done together because she doesn’t drive past the movie theater or the park when she goes on a drive. I am. I do. I haven’t gone a day without thinking of Kate since I watched her leave my life. I’ve been obsessing for weeks over how our conversations will go when we meet again. Everything that this car ride will solve, I have run through time and time again, but only the good ones. I couldn’t bear the thought of being turned

down or coming face to face with the reality that Kate might not be in a place where being with me completes her anymore.

I looked back at Sydney. I felt awful for letting loose on her like that, I really did. It kills me to see her upset, it's like kicking a goddamn puppy across the face. She had her head leaned up against the car window and was mouthing the words to the songs on the radio. I turned up the music. It was a god-awful song, but I knew it was one of her favorites. I cranked the volume as high as I could without hearing the busted speaker in the back rattling like a can of nails. Her voice grew louder with the music, and she lifted her head from the window. She looked at me as she sang her little heart out, it was adorable. No matter what shit I talk about Syd, she's my best friend.

Syd grabbed my hand that was resting on the gear shift, "Sing with me, Conway!"

When your little sister pulls something like that, you can't turn it down. It's the law. I smiled at her and began singing along. She smiled that smile that could light up a funeral and we rolled the windows down, singing almost until we lost our voices.

We finally pulled up to the dorm where Kate lives, and my heart skipped a beat. I couldn't bear the thought of calling her, but I had to. I mean, I have no idea what room she's in, just the building. I only know that because I asked her mom not long after she moved in how things were going for her. I unlocked my phone and scrolled until I found her name. I stared at her contact picture in my phone for minutes on end. It was a picture that she had sent me after I had left my ball cap and sweatshirt over there one time. She was wearing them both and captioned it saying, "Look, I'm you now!" Goddammit, if that picture didn't make me so happy when I first got it. We weren't even dating yet, but she was wearing my clothes. It's a good feeling when you realize for the first time that your girl is just as crazy about you as you are about her.

My focus broke from her picture when Syd grabbed my wrist and blurted, "Is that her?"

A gasp fell from my lungs as I looked up. It was her. She was going to her car.

“Get her attention, Conway.”

“Oh fuck,” was the only thing I could say.

“If you don’t say something, I will.” Syd started to unbuckle her seatbelt.

“Oh my God, I can’t.”

“Jesus, fine.”

Syd leapt from the car and ran out to Kate; they had always loved each other. They were practically sisters; it was much cuter than it was weird. Syd ran up and wrapped her arms around Kate’s chest. I could see the thrilled but confused look on Kate’s face. They released from their hug as Syd started firing off a conversation at a thousand words per second. Kate looked over and locked in on my eyes. Her face was expressionless as she listened to Syd droning on. The pair of them started walking toward the car as my stomach broke through the floorboards of my car and dented the pavement beneath me. She came to the driver’s side door and crossed her arms on the windowsill.

“What are you doing here?” She asked with a grin. Her voice was just as soft as I remembered it, beautiful.

“I—I’m not sure, to be completely honest.”

Her head tilted in the same, cute way that a dog does when it hears its squeaky toy.

I sighed, “I got tired of being at home, so Syd and I decided to come see you.”

“Still as impulsive as ever, huh?”

“I guess I haven’t changed too much,” I let out a weak chuckle.

Kate exhaled sharply out of her nose, “Seriously, why did you come all the way here, just to see me?”

“I’m starving, you want to go grab some lunch?”

“Answer me, Conway.”

I bit the bullet, “Yes, I missed you. I couldn’t stand driving past all our old spots without having you there to laugh and reminisce with. I just wanted to come and talk to you to make sure that you’re still that same girl.”

Her face erupted into a grin so warm that it would melt the ice caps without the help of the hole in the ozone layer. She slapped the side of my car and ran around to the shotgun seat, “Hope you don’t mind, Syd.”

Sydney smiled and climbed over top of the console kicking me square in the chest in the process. She was happy for me, I could tell.

“Where we going to eat?” Kate asked as she slid into the seat beside me, as if she had never left.

Keeping her memory alive in words on a screen is what made me drive out to find her. Imagination is a funny thing, in that way. Being able to use my life’s experience with Kate and write honestly about her gave me the catharsis that I needed to keep moving forward with my life and not curl into a ball of loneliness, neglecting Syd so that I could wallow in self-pity. I knew that I needed to write to stay sane for both of our sakes. However, what I did not expect was for my writing to, in the right moment, serve me with a moment of self-inflicted therapy that made me realize what the missing piece was in my heart. Kate and I were once again those lovesick kids that, until that moment, I thought had left no trace other than a mention of her name in a passing conversation with an old friend or the encrypted

memories in my laptop. Unequivocally committed to one another and strengthened further by our shared love for Sydney, I had found family.