

Tap...tap...tap

Her fingers tapped idly upon the spacebar of her keyboard. Everything she wanted to say was there. In her heart. In her bones. But her mind? Her mind was a complete blank. Fleeting passes of the words she wanted to come forth edged into the peripherals of her mind's eye, before they ebbed back into the fog of doubt, making her fingers retreat from the keys.

She groaned and pushed herself back from her desk. Those precious words eluded her for now. But they had to come soon. Now more than ever in her life, she *needed* to say them. Then again, what would it matter? By now, nothing she could say would take back what had happened last year. The damage had been done, and no words she could think of would ever undo it.

Outside her window, the snow fell from the sky, blanketing the ground in its stark white chill. She watched the snow, wondering what beauty and treasures waited beneath it. Months from then, the change of the seasons would open the giftwrap of winter and reveal the splendor beneath. For now, it was protected by its layers of cold. And it would be a long, long time before she ever saw the splendor of Spring once more.

With the coming of Spring, school would have started up again. Her heart clenched at the idea of going back. She knew what the students there would think of her. Even the people who still sided with her didn't want to be around her anymore. But there was no running from it. She would have to face what was coming whether she wanted to or not.

**Knock knock **

Creak

“Amber, honey? We’re about ready to leave.”

The call of the familiar voice did nothing to take her eyes from the white void beyond the glass. Without even glancing at the reflection in her window, she answered, “I’m almost done here, mom. I’ll be down in a moment.”

Whatever was said next to her, she didn’t hear it. The world was nothing but a haze to her, and the sounds were only white noise. She barely registered the click of her door as her mother exited, leaving her alone with nothing but the void. Among it, the image of herself began to form into being against the glass, pulling itself into terrible focus.

Unable to bear the sight any longer, she turned away back to her screen, faced with the blank white of the page she wished to type. Against its harsh glare, there she was again, a pallid, stark copy of the one she once was.

“God–Damn!” she said, dropping her fist limply upon her desk.

She wanted to blame somebody. To point a finger and take everything off of herself would have been glorious. A sweet salve that would relieve her of any burden and take all responsibility from herself. The room seemed to spin as tears leaked from her eyes. She knew it couldn’t have been true. Everyone else was always the cause of her problems. If anything, everyone was against her long before she had messed everything up! Except she knew that it couldn’t have been true. This time, no matter how she wished it, no matter how much she wanted to or tried to fool herself, it was all her fault.

Her fingers hovered over her keyboard again. Then her finger dropped upon a single key. Then again. And again. And the silence of her room was filled with the rapid ticking of the keys, typing her life away onto the page before her.

What is this...?

The world had become a blurred haze. He could barely remember anything that had happened just before. Not the music. Not the place. But the people... There was her...

Who's there...?

A shadow passed before his eyes. And it was smiling at him. Through the dark, he could see it grinning maliciously at him. It wanted him. It had him. And he was helpless as he felt himself thrown down as if by a great force.

He wanted to shout. He wanted to yell for help and end this nightmare. But there was nothing he could do. His voice sat paralyzed in his throat and his limbs felt as if they were made of lead. And the weight grew as the shadow straddled his legs.

The hands of the shadow rested upon his chest. They were colder than anything he had felt in his life. And those hands were going to do as they wished. Nothing could stop them. Not now as they traced down his waist, all the way to his hips. And then, there was the jingling of metal.

What are you doing...?

Something slithered across his hips, and the sounds of metal grew louder. That feeling waned as the shadow sat up, holding a length of leather in its hands. It loomed over him, placing the vile cord over his neck and pushing down, stopping his breath for a moment before it relented.

Nobody would come for him. He remembered the door being locked. Nor did he remember telling anyone what he was doing. It was only him and the thing in the dark. The thing that reached down and tucked its fingers beneath the waist of his jeans.

His pants suddenly loosened, and there was the sound of a zipper slowly being undone.

No...Stop...!

Bump-Bump

The sharp jostling of the bus as it went over a pothole jolted Riley from his sleep. When it happened, he was barely aware that he had even been asleep at all. His eyes cracked open and he had to squint from the sudden intrusion of bright light that assaulted his vision.

Shoot! Did I miss my stop!

He looked around at the other passengers, spotting the familiar faces that rode along with him on the route 113. At the front of the bus were two elderly men.

“I remember Jack,” the first old man said. “He was one hell of a guy. Always ready with a smoke and a story to tell. I’ll never forget the way he always brought that dog with him everywhere. Even after it died, he kept his teeth on a necklace.”

“You remember ‘jack’ alright,” said the equally elderly man beside him. “Jack hated dogs. He hated all animals. Almost as much as he hated kids! That’s why he never got married! ‘I ain’t doin’ nothin’ that might tempt an ankle-biter,’ he’d always say!”

“There’s a steamin’ load if I ever heard it!” the first old man said. “Jack was a hero! He did great things and made so many sacrifices for us all!”

“I’d like to sacrifice you, you senile old coot!” the second old man said

Behind them, a mother juggled her four children, who all shared the same seat.

“When are we going to get there?” the oldest of the children asked.

“Soon. It’s just a few more stops from here,” the mother replied.

“How many stops? We’ve been on this bus forever!” the next youngest asked.

“It’ll be this next stop and then two more after that.”

“How do you know? What if the bus never stops? What if we die here?” the third youngest pleaded.

“We’ll know when we get there,” the mother answered with a shrug.

In her lap, the youngest of all slept soundly.

Behind her and her children, two men sat side by side. One as dark as the night. The other as pale as a sheet.

“You feeling okay, man?” the dark man asked.

“Uh...” the pale man said, holding his stomach. He looked up at his friend, his eyes streaked with red.

“You better slow down, homie. You look like tomatoes on white bread,” the dark man said, his voice laced with concern.

The pale man moaned again and rested his head against the seat in front of him.

Thank God. Still some more stops before home.

The ride home was always long. Though one might have thought it was treacherous for want of better company, Riley never minded. The long commute gave him all the time he needed to rest or daydream. Or sometimes...remember.

Riley shook what thoughts lingered from his head and put in his AirPods. He scrolled through his phone, looking for that one song that he always went back to when he needed to hear it. Titles of a hundred different songs passed by him, their eclectic shifts from artist and genre practically dancing in a jumbled pattern unreadable to all but him. Finally, he found it.

Click

A piano began to play and Riley turned his head to the window. The trees passed by his view, the closest one whipping past at the speed of light while those in the distance lingered on. As always, far in the distance was that gnarled, menacing tree awaiting his gaze. For as long as he remembered, he hated the sight of it. It was an ugly thing that he had to keep looking back on. Something terrible that he wanted to think wasn't real, but was always there to remind him how real it was. And no matter how much he hated it, it would always be there.

It had happened all so suddenly. With just that one mistake, everything had gone wrong. Riley glanced at that horrible tree, and he groaned as he closed his eyes.

“Wait! What are you doing!?”

His hands flew protectively in front of him, pushing back the girl by her shoulders.

She sat staring back at him, her eyes wide with shock and her hands trembling. It wasn't supposed to turn out like this. They had known each other for so long. He had to have liked her. It couldn't have been any other way.

“I-I'm sorry! I though that...” she stammered.

Her nerves eased as she felt his hands gently grip her shoulders. His hands always had a way of calming her. Whenever she needed it the most, there was his hand on her shoulder to ground her. Whenever she felt anxious or irrational, it was always him who helped.

“Amber...” he began, “I... You’re such a good friend. But, I’m just not ready for something like this.”

She had told him she understood. And that was where it should have ended. But she wanted him. She would have him.

Her fingers hovered over the keyboard, anxiously waiting to type what happened next. She wished that it had never happened. Even now, she wanted to say aloud that someone else was to blame. That she was forced to go to that party against her will. Or that she had been talked into doing what she had done. But she knew it wasn’t so. Those mental gymnastics wouldn’t serve her now.

The chair groaned as she leaned over her desk, her fingers streaking through her hair as she held her head in her hands.

In the common room of the dorms, two boys waited. Shane swiveled impatiently in his chair, while Riley leaned casually against a table.

“Are you girls done yet? We’re going to be late,” Shane called down the hall.

“We just need to be there before 8:00. Quit bothering us,” a female voice from down the hall answered.

Shane leaned his head back and groaned. “Why do girls always take so long?”

Riley wasn’t sure if Shane wanted an answer but responded anyway. “You know how they are. Got to be picture-perfect for their socials. I just learned it’s better not to rush them.”

“I wish they’d learn how to rush themselves,” Shane said. “Speaking of the girls, are you going to finally make a move tonight?”

“What? With who?” Riley wondered.

“Don’t act like you don’t know.”

Riley answered with a blank stare.

“Amber! Who did you think I meant!?” Shane blurted out.

“Dude, don’t start with that again,” Riley answered, rolling his eyes. “I told you that I’m not really in a good place for a relationship.”

“What place? Second year of college is as good a place as any?” Shane insisted.

“Yeah. Second year of college. No steady income. No stable job. Not even an internship. Trying to start my own businesses on the side. Looming student debts. Failing at least one class—”

“Alright. Enough with the excuses,” Shane said, waving his hand at Riley.

“They’re not excuses. It’s the truth,” Riley indignantly said.

“Then you’d better get it all took care of fast. I bet your virginity’s grown back after all this time. I should start calling you Father Riley, you’re so close to priesthood.”

“You’re not gonna convince me this way,” Riley said, unimpressed.

“Dude, she likes you, and she’s hot, and she’s single. It’s the holy-fucking-trinity! She’s practically throwing herself at you, and you’re acting like she’s wallpaper!” Shane said.

Riley winced internally at the memory of what had happened before with Amber.

“I’m just not ready,” he simply said.

“Your loss,” Shane shrugged.

Tap...tap...tap

The sounds of high heels could be heard as one of the girls entered the living room. For that night, she had chosen to wear a long black gown covered with prints of moons and bats. In her hand, she was holding a small broom.

“Amber! You look terrifying,” Shane joked.

“That’s the point,” Amber said, her face a deadpan smile.

Tap...tap...tap

More footsteps entered the living room. From the shadows of the hall to the light of the living room came a sight that awed everyone. There she was, dressed in a shining, skin-tight yellow dress that reached just barely above her knees. On her head she wore a green cloche hat. Around her neck, a string of costume pearls.

“Damn! Lookin’ good, Rosy,” Shane whistled as he got up and put his arms around her.

“I’d better. It’s not easy to wear this,” she said. She glanced over at Riley. “Well?”

“I like it,” Riley nodded. “The color suits you.”

“Yeah. I like the color too. But, it’s just so short,” Rosy said.

“You look fine,” Amber insisted. “Have you seen Stacy’s outfit? I’m just glad her mother isn’t here to see her.”

“She might. She’s been posting it all over Instagram for the last two days,” Rosy said. She looked over her own dress again. “I can’t believe we women willingly do this to ourselves.”

“Even harder to believe is that you women hate us men for liking it when you do it,” Shane joked.

“We do not!” Rosy giggled, pushing Shane but barely moving him when she tried. “Got the keys, baby sis?”

Amber jingled the car keys and tossed them to Shane. “You’re driving, big mouth.”

“I think she’s talking to you,” Shane said to Rosy.

“Shut up and drive,” Rosy said, leading Shane to the door.

Riley lingered a moment, catching Amber’s eyes for a fleeting moment before he walked after his friends. Amber watched him go, feeling as if she were waiting for him to leave before she followed after him.

The party was at a house off campus and was in full swing by the time they got there. From flowing ghoulish gowns to eyeball Halloween treats and candy-floss cobwebs, it was less of a Halloween party and more of an undead Cinderella’s Halloween ball. Everyone with everyone, the music escaping from every open window and door. Bright lights shining for the ceiling, the color of cherries told an earthy tale of love and laughter, of more good times than anyone could ever be promised.

For Amber and her friends, it was enough to join in the fun. Most of the other people were already in full party mode, drunk. Shane had already grabbed them a shot of something, shoving the red plastic cup into Riley's hand.

"Cheers!" he shouted.

Riley simply tilted his cup toward Shane before he began sipping his drink.

Amber looked unsurely at the cup that had been handed to her by her sister. She sniffed it and found the smell overpowering. Timidly, she sipped her drink and winced like she had just tasted roadkill. While Amber put her drink down, Rosy and the boys were already downing more drinks.

The night carried on and Amber stuck close by Riley. They talked as they normally did as though nothing had happened. Their usual talks of their current favorite video games and their mutual dislike of the artist playing over the speakers were as natural as ever. But there was always that lingering thought in the back of Amber's mind. One that crawled forth like a spider from the darkest parts of its web as she began to hear Riley's speech slur. How many drinks had he had that night? Six? Or was it seven by now?

Riley had suddenly lurched forward, nearly toppling over Amber even as she caught him. It was decided. Even if Riley didn't think so, he had had enough and it was time for him to go home. She told her sister and Shane that she was going to take Riley back home. She was given the keys, and Amber returned Riley to his dorm.

Nobody else was there. They had all gone to the party. It was just them now. Amber could feel Riley's grip on her shoulders loosening, and she quickly guided him over to the couch. And there

he laid. Helpless. Completely at her mercy. This was her moment. A smirk crawled onto Amber's face, and she began to take what was hers.

She's still out there...

Riley looked out the bus window at the sky. It was past noon now. Just a few more minutes of peace.

It couldn't be told if Amber's confession had come too soon or too late. She had elaborated upon everything openly. But why she had even done it was beyond him. His life was forever ruined because of her. No matter what people thought about her after the fact, he was still a demon in their eyes. Amber would always have her supporters. Nobody was on Riley's side. And he knew why. To them, he had some power over Amber. Somehow, they had all been convinced that only he could have been at fault for that incident.

The song on Riley's phone ended. The moment it had, his mind began to regurgitate all of the worries of the day. Of tomorrow. Of yesterday. He had been searching for answers ever since that day, but never found them. All he could do now was what he had been doing for the past year and take each day as it came.

Nothing could erase the past. All he could do was try to move beyond it. But like that horrible tree in the distance, it was always there. Even if he forgot about it and never saw that tree again, it would always be there in that otherwise immaculate piece of scenery.

Outside his window, a familiar sign passed by. Finally, he was close. He sat himself up, took hold of the cable over his seat and pulled on it. A loud buzz rang through the bus, alerting the driver to the stop, and the driver's voice crackled over the intercom to announce the stop.

“You need to tell them what really happened,” he said.

“I already did! It isn’t my fault if they don’t want to listen!” she shouted back.

“Do you not know what they’re saying about me!? They think that it was all my idea! They think I drugged you and– Fuck!”

“Well, do you think anyone would believe it the other way around?!” she yelled. “You were drunk! And I– I was drunk enough! We both agreed to it! Shane didn’t have to give me the keys! He could have driven you home!”

“Shane had nothing to do with this! You did everything on your own decisions!” he spat back.

She looked pitifully at him, knowing that he was wrong. She knew what had happened that night, and no burden could have been placed on her. “Riley, none of this is my fault.”

As he exited the bus, Riley could feel himself fading from the rest of the world. No matter what proof was presented of his innocence, he would never have his old life back. The trauma, pain and tears would always be a part of him. And for the rest of his life, he could only wear a painted smile.

The new town did little to help him. He had a new school and a new job. His old friends were put behind him, and his new friends knew nothing of his past. From now on, he could only look ahead.

One last stroke of the keyboard, and it was finished.

She leaned back, looking over everything. Nothing was left out. The truth was there for all the world to see. Thinking back, she wasn't sure why she did it to begin with, or why she decided to come out with it now. Not that it would have mattered.

Her finger rested upon the enter key. One press and by tomorrow morning, the whole world would know what she had done.

She took a deep breath.

Click