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TO LIVE WITH

By

Serina Lund

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the
University Honors Program

Department of Nursing
The University of South Dakota
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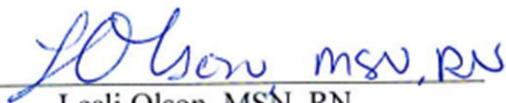
The members of the Honors Thesis Committee appointed
to examine the thesis of Serina Lund
find it satisfactory and recommend that it be accepted.



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ABSTRACT

To Live With

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To Live With is a story about an individual, Charlie, living with schizophrenia. The story follows Charlie as he grows up, from a time of no definitive signs of schizophrenia to his first major episode and the consequences that follow. I utilized knowledge and research stemming from my nursing education to create a character meant to connect with readers in a way that broadens their view on mental illness. This story only shows one view of what living with schizophrenia may be like and is in no way intended to encompass all of schizophrenia. I searched for ways to show symptoms of the diagnosis in my writing that built up the character into their own person, a method that prevents the character from being defined by schizophrenia. The condition is not something that explains, drives, or hinders his life, but rather, is something that he lives with as he creates his own way of being in the world. My intent was, and still is, to create and bring to life an impactful character that shows there is not, and never will be, one way to categorize individuals, despite what they may or may not be dealing with in that moment.

KEYWORDS: Schizophrenia, Mental Illness, Creative Writing, Fiction, Short Fiction

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Chapter 1

A seed is thrown violently through the water and is suddenly flung from the stream. For a moment, it is quiet. Then, the ground begins to shake, voices yelling.

The sky is grey, rain is pouring, clouds moving fast in the valley.

“You’ll never catch me,” he yells through laughter as he stomps hurriedly through the mud next to the small stream. Mud splashes around his feet, covering his small rain boots.

A second pair of faster, larger feet follow his path. He turns to look behind him, but she is closer to him than he expected.

“I got you,” a second voice exclaims with laughter. She lifts him up and throws him over her shoulder as she begins walking back towards the house in the distance amidst his struggling. “God, you’re so little,” she taunts.

“No, I’m not! I will be 10 in 2 weeks,” he argues. “Then you’ll only be 2 years older than me. You’ll have to stop treating me like a child,” he boasts.

Her face is taken over by a sly smirk. “No I won’t. Only children still have imaginary friends.”

He goes silent and begins to pout, crossing his arms over his chest. Nothing gets said for a few minutes until a woman comes in to view.

“Sarah! You’re getting taller by the day,” she exclaims, voice full of warmth.

“Growing faster than Charlie,” Sarah states with pride.

“MOM! Make her let me down!” exclaims Charlie.

“Maybe I should let her carry you all the way into the house like that Charlie, your shoes are all muddy and I just cleaned the floors,” Charlie’s mother jokes.

“Her shoes are just as bad!” Charlie cries out, which begins another argument between Sarah and Charlie. Charlie’s mother laughs at the sight.

“Okay Sarah, put him down so I can get him cleaned up for supper. He can come play again afterwards. Your mother is looking for you as well.”

Their little valley is quiet. The street is empty other than the young girl crossing it. On the other side of the road, a slightly larger valley opens to accommodate a small community.

Back on the other side of the road, the mother and her son walk towards the house in comfortable silence. The house is a humble home, made of three small rooms, two bathrooms, a kitchen/dining room, and a quaint kitchen. Just past the entryway sits a cozy couch with a recliner on one side and a rocking chair on the other. A TV is positioned on a cabinet across the space from the couch, a DVD player and a small radio below it. To the left of the TV sits a small beanbag chair, an open notebook splayed across it, filled with the imaginative stories of a young boy. Past the living room, a hallway with four doors can be seen. One door goes into the parents’ room, two doors lead into a child’s room, and one door into a bathroom that the children share. To the right lies a small but tidy kitchen, dishes drying next to the sink and a casserole baking in the oven. The pantry door sits slightly open as a cat slinks into it, likely stalking another mouse. On the far side of the kitchen, just out of view of the front door, lies a kitchen table.

Another girl, a few years older than the boy, sits at the kitchen table working on a math equation. Just enough sunlight comes through the window that the girl does not have to turn on a light yet. If she continues to work on schoolwork once the sun drops behind the mountains then she will need to turn on the small lamp next to her.

A man walks tiredly towards the house, leaving behind the barn and his office within. His disposition brightens as he sees his wife and son walk into their home. He can already imagine how good the house is going to smell as he enters, much better than the barn behind him that smells of manure. He smiles, deciding that after supper and night chores, he will have his children go collect some apples from the nearby tree so that he can make his wife's favorite apple pie.

The mother and her son enter the house. The mother watches with a careful eye to ensure that he removes his muddy boots before entering the house, and sends him to wash up. Entering the kitchen, the mother sits down next to her daughter.

“How's your homework going sweetie?” she asks.

“It's good, I'm almost done but stuck on one problem,” the girl states. “I just don't understand the quadratic equation or why I will ever need to use it,” she sighs in frustration.

“Why don't you grab your notes, and we will see if I can help,” the mother states.

The girl gets up and rushes off to the second door on the right of the hallway. She appears just a few seconds later, a purple backpack in hand, slightly worn with a few pages sticking haphazardly out the top. The girl returns to the table at the same time as her father enters the door.

He gingerly removes his boots, careful to keep them on the rug so that any dust from the barn doesn't touch the freshly cleaned floors. He saunters over to give his wife and daughter a hug, setting his straw hat on the kitchen counter. His wife glances at the hat, then at him, a sweet but challenging look in her eyes. The man smiles sheepishly and quickly removes his hat from the counter, giving his wife a swift kiss on the lips and smiles at her in silent apology. As he is about to speak, the little boy reappears. His hands are clean, and he has changed into fresh clothes.

“Charlie,” he states, “all ready for supper?”

“Yup! Hi daddy,” Charlie states as he quickly sits in his seat at the table, anxiously awaiting supper.

“Not so fast buddy, why don't we set the table to help your mom out while Cara puts her homework away?”

“Okay!” Charlie exclaims as he gets up to grab four plates from the counter while his father grabs silverware from the drawer.

Charlie and his father are just setting the last water glasses on the table as his mother transfers a casserole pan from the oven to the table. Cara runs back and takes her seat to the right of Charlie as he begins to reach for the pan.

“Charlie!” his mother exclaims, “don't touch that! The pan is still very hot.”

“But Mom!” Charlie exclaims. Surely there is more to come, but he is interrupted by his father.

“After dinner I would like the two of you to go pick some apples from the tree down the road,” he states as he takes his seat at the table, “if there are enough ripe ones then we can make apple pie.”

At this, all three pairs of eyes looking back at him light up.

“Four apples should do it, don’t you think?” he smiles lightly at his wife.

“Me and Cara can do it,” Charlie states grinning.

“Yeah,” Cara replies with enthusiasm. “But I still have homework I need help with,” she states sadly a second later

“It’s okay,” Charlie states, “Max can help me!”

At this, Charlie’s father gives his mother a skeptical look, but she brushes it off without a thought.

“Max isn’t real Charlie.” Cara states, the fact rolling off her tongue as if she has to say it often.

“Yes, he is.” Charlie argues back.

“It’s okay, Charlie. You might just have to make 2 trips to get enough apples,” his mother states.

“I bet I can get them all in one trip,” he states with excitement.

“Bring your plate to the sink and wash it off before you leave,” his father states, “and don’t drop them too much on your way back.” He is barely finished speaking before Charlie has placed his plate in the sink, without washing it, and is running out the door.

“Be careful on the road,” Charlie’s mom shouts after him.

The three still at the table get up and place their plates near the sink before returning to the table to finish cleaning up.

“Cara, why don’t you wipe off the table and then grab your homework. I can help you after we finish the dishes?” her mother states. Cara rushes to grab the rag to clean the table with and her mother and father begin to work together to clean the dishes. As her mother washes dishes, her father glances out the window to see Charlie on his way down the road to the apple tree, moving his hands animatedly as he walks.

“Why does he still have imaginary friends?” his father asks quietly.

“It’s nothing Charles. He is still young,” his mother states, sure of herself, “let him enjoy being a child for a while longer.”

“Other children his age do not have imaginary friends Claire. You have heard the same as me at parent-teacher conferences, the other children pick on him for having imaginary friends,” he states, only the slightest bit of anxiety invading his calm voice.

“Don’t worry about it Charles, he will grow out of it.”

Chapter 2

As Charlie exits the house, a figure appears next to him. The boy wears a wrinkled grey shirt and a pair of tan shorts with the bottom seam frayed. A blue baseball cap sits atop his head, and he wears an ominous smile, looking straight at Charlie.

“There you are,” exclaims Charlie, “I couldn’t find you earlier, where were you?”

“Don’t worry about it,” Max states with nonchalance.

“Guess what I did today?”

“Not sure. Same as every other day?” Max utters, watching the birds in the distance.

“Sarah came over and we played in the mud and...”

“Hey, you know what we should do?” Max interrupts.

A frown falls onto Charlie’s face at how his friend did not want to listen to him, but it is quickly replaced by a look of excitement with one glance at Max’s face. He watches Max, aware that the smile on his face often means he has an idea.

“We should play a game.”

They reach the apple orchard, the houses in the small valley community are simply blobs of color. A few small birds, blackbirds, caw quietly to each other a few feet away.

“What game?” Charlie asks, voice full of excitement.

“Let’s see who can scare away more birds.” A look of confusion overcomes Charlie’s face.

“Why would we do that?”

“Why not?” Max challenges.

“Well...” Charlie starts, unsure of himself. “I don’t want to hurt them.”

“Who cares about that?”

“Why don’t we just grab some apples and head home?”

“Fine.”

Max goes quiet as Charlie heads towards the closest tree, looking for any ripe low-hanging apples. He sees one apple he can reach, but the rest of the ripe ones are up too high.

“I have to climb up to get the apples, wanna come with me?” Charlie questions, looking at his friend happily.

“No,” Max says, his voice monotone.

“Oh.... Well just stay there. I’ll be down in just a minute.”

Charlie begins to climb the tree and grabs three apples, lightly tossing them onto the ground so they roll next to the one already there.

He makes his way to the ground again, but when he turns around, Max is gone. Charlie’s mood falls flat. He picks up the apples and walks back to the house in silence, the only sound being the noise of his shoes against the gravel road.

Charlie enters the house with a blank expression. The sun has gone down by now, the main room is lit by an overhead light in the kitchen and a lamp next to the dining room table. Cara sits at the table working on her homework, her mother sits next to her, while her father works on preparing the necessary ingredients for apple pie. Charlie sets the apples next to the rolled-out crusts and walks to sit on the couch.

“Hey buddy!” exclaims his father, “Thanks for getting the apples. Everything else is ready, want to help me cut up the apples?”

“No,” Charlie states flatly as he stares out the window.

Charles realizes that this is odd behavior for his son. Usually, Charlie is the first to volunteer to help out. Charles glances at his wife, wondering if she has noticed the odd behavior from their son. She catches him looking at her and smiles, waving off the odd behavior. *No big deal, let him be his own person*, Claire thinks to herself.

Chapter 3

On his fourteenth birthday, Charlie sits at a table surrounded by his friends and family. Sarah sits next to him, a beaming smile on her face. On his other side, sits his mother and father. Next to Sarah, Cara stands, attempting to light the last candle on the birthday cake for Charlie. There are fourteen candles, all perfectly lined up. Yet, Charlie's face shows no emotion. No smile, no excited glint in his eyes, nothing.

Across the room, Charlie sees Max staring at him. Max hasn't changed a bit. He stands in the same tattered grey shirt and frayed tan shorts, even the expression on his face remains the same. His hair, messier and longer than Charlie's, hangs low on his head, almost covering his eyes. His eyes are a dull grey color, but they focus directly on Charlie, almost as if they are daring him.

Daring him to make a scene, to act out. Daring him to tell everyone that this isn't what he wants. But Charlie remains quiet, remains empty.

The last candle is lit, and the singing begins. Charlie blocks out the sound and focuses only on the wood grain of the table. His finger traces the worn surface, skin catching a bit on the rough patches. As the singing concludes, he sees the expectant look on everyone's faces, looking straight at him. He knows what they expect.

"Happy Birthday!" everyone shouts at once. The sound makes Charlie cringe.

"Blow your candles out Charlie" Sarah smiles at him. She is the only one he cares about. He leans forward and blows out the candles all at once.

His friends and family erupt in cheers, but Charlie's eyes don't light up as they once did. Instead, his eyes remain a dull brown, a stark contrast to the girl next to him.

Sarah is sixteen now, still taller than Charlie. Her skin is tanned from playing soccer, her eyes still the same brilliant blue as they were when they were younger. Around her neck lies a silver chain with a small fifteen charm. Charlie had given it to her for her fifteenth birthday last year. He had mowed lawns all summer to get it for her and still needed his parent's help to afford it, but everyone could see how important it was to him to get her a meaningful present. They had been friends since they were young. Back then, Charlie had been a cheerful child, running and getting into everything he could. His family had moved into the house across the street from Sarah and her mother.

Sarah and her mother lived in a quaint house in the valley, nothing special. Its yellow color was forever fading but still managed to seem well maintained, if not in need of a new coat of paint. The small areas of peeling paint on the windowsills were hidden by the flower boxes that had been there as long as Charlie can remember. Sarah's mother loved flowers and all plants. Every year she had a magnificent garden that she made time for whenever she could. Sarah helped with the garden and had inherited her mother's passion, if a slightly altered version. Sarah loved plants, but her passion for animals overwhelmed her.

When a new family had moved into the house across the street, Sarah took immediately to their cat, Stormy. Claire found Stormy in the woods behind the house when she was a kitten. Her coat was long and grey, often holding a few surprise cockaburrs from her mouse hunting escapades. Stormy was like any other cat, choosing

her moments of when she wanted attention and when she wanted to be left alone. What set her apart was her eyes, one brown and one blue.

Despite not requiring a lot of attention, Stormy always tolerated Sarah. She would allow Sarah to pretend to examine her, even hold still to let Sarah play doctor and remove the cockaburrs. No matter what Sarah did, Stormy's eyes remain calm, but whenever anyone else tries to get too close, her eyes become squinted and suspicious.

Cats may have been Sarah's favorite animal, but they were not the only ones she cared for. Whenever Sarah's mother was unable to find her daughter, she could count on finding her in Charlie's barn. The barn was not big by any means but was kept clean and well-stocked by Charles. It only contained a few horse stalls, a makeshift office for Charles, and a small chicken coup. Only one horse occupied the stalls, Stanley.

Stanley was Charles' horse. He was a magnificent deep brown, standing tall even at the age of seventeen. He had been around as long as Charlie or Cara could remember. Stanley was the horse that Charlie and Cara, and of course Sarah, had learned to ride on. Charlie can remember one specific time when Stanley had gotten sick. He must have been around twelve, making Sarah fourteen years old. Charlie and Sarah had been sitting outside quietly, Sarah reading her newest book and Charlie simply staring into the distance, when they heard a thud and a weak neigh come from the barn. Charlie hadn't even reacted, but Sarah had jumped up immediately and ran to the barn, calling for Charlie to follow her. Charlie followed, albeit slowly, to find Sarah with the stall door swung wide open as she sat on the ground next to Stanley. Stanley laid on the ground, seemingly exhausted despite not having done any activity. His ribs seeming to shake as his breaths came out in small puffs. Sarah jumped into action quickly, calling for Charlie

to find his father and call the veterinarian to come see what was wrong. The veterinarian arrived and stated that Stanley would be fine once given a new medication. The fall and shaking had been due to diaphragm spasms caused by an electrolyte imbalance, but Charlie doesn't remember any more than that.

What he remembers most is the look in Sarah's eyes as she tried to figure out what was wrong with Stanley. She took in the area around her and Charlie's eyes followed, but his focus wasn't the same. Instead, he was thinking about what a good veterinarian Sarah would be. Sarah had wanted to be a veterinarian ever since she was a child, and everyone around her knew it. As soon as she graduated high school in two years, she would move away to attend university and was determined to get into any veterinarian school that would take her. She didn't care how far away she would need to go for school. Of course, she would miss everyone and would like to stay close to home, but she knew that it might not be possible. Besides, she planned to move back and join Jack's veterinarian clinic here in town as soon as she finished.

Currently, she works at Jack's helping to clean cages and feed the animals. She already made a deal with Jack that she could work there with him after graduation. Jack was a fifty-year-old man with graying hair and a small beard. He always wore blue jean overalls with a white T-shirt and a plaid button-up. No matter how hot or cold it was outside, Charlie could never remember Jack wearing anything different. Jack seemed to know everyone in town but was especially close to Charlie's family. Jack and Charles had hit it off quickly and become quite good friends. Additionally, Jack had a son Charlie's age, Hunter. Hunter and Charlie had never been great friends, more like acquaintances who tolerated each other for the sake of their parents. Being that Jack spent

multiple evenings at Charlie's house, he also got to know Sarah quite well. He taught her all he could and was looking forward to the day when he could hand his clinic over to Sarah and retire.

Everyone in town knew Sarah would do great things, and as Charlie looked at her smile at him, there was no way he could disagree. Despite this, Charlie didn't smile back. It's not that he wasn't happy, he just didn't show emotion, he never really did.

"Time for cake," Charles exclaims.

"Finally," Cara cheers and those around her let out a small chuckle.

Charles begins cutting into the cake, handing Charlie the biggest slice before handing out pieces to everyone else. Charlie grabs a fork and gets a small bit of frosting on it to taste. Before the fork touches his lips, Max's voice rings across the room.

"Are you sure it's safe?" he states carelessly. He didn't raise his voice, but it seems to hit Charlie's ears clearer than anyone's voice even from the corner of the room. Max doesn't look at Charlie, but he gets the message across anyway.

You never know what people could have added to food that you didn't cook. There could be poison in it.

Charlie sets down his fork, intensely looking at each person in turn, watching for signs of poisoning. His mother and father seem to be fine, smiling happily at each other. Cara and Sarah do not show any signs of suffering or sickness, speaking enthusiastically to each other about how good the cake is.

A few minutes have passed and no one else is feeling sick, it likely isn't poisoned. But maybe it is a poison that takes a while to kick in. Or maybe someone managed to poison only the piece that Charlie is holding. Maybe his family is even in on it. No. They wouldn't do that, he knows that. But he can't risk it. Instead, Charlie places his plate back down onto the table.

Chapter 4

Sun shines down on the fields out the window. It looks to be the perfect day; younger children are outside playing on the playground. But Charlie knows better. He knows that they are coming, coming for him. He sits in the classroom, staring out the window as usual. A blank look across his face. Around him, classmates talk of the latest gossip as they work on the assigned worksheet. Charlie doesn't know what the worksheet is on, and he doesn't care. The teachers have stopped trying.

He sits and stares blankly throughout class, not answering questions or engaging with anyone. When handed worksheets to complete, he shoves them in his backpack. The next day the worksheet is completed. This is how it has been since the beginning of school months ago. For all he cares, Charlie might as well not even be in class or in school at all. He could just drop out, but his parents won't let him, and he doesn't care to argue. The teachers and Charlie's parents have tried to get him to engage but nothing they try works. The only one who can get through to him is Sarah. Sarah takes it upon herself to teach him the basics of class. He even has a hard time paying attention when she is teaching it to him, but he gets enough of it to pass, even if he is barely passing.

The bell rings to signal the end of the school day. Charlie stuffs the worksheet into his backpack and zips it up, crumpling the paper in the process. He walks out to the bus and stands waiting. As he waits, ants build a colony between the blades of grass a few feet away. A few minutes pass and the ants begin to hurry into the tunnels of the colony, running from something Charlie cannot see. They are sending him a message; they are telling him he needs to hide. Charlie recognizes the message but isn't surprised.

He already knew it was coming for him, he has known all day, all month even. It creeps closer, he can feel it, but there isn't anything he can do about it.

The bus arrives and Charlie takes an open seat. Sarah boards the bus as well, going to sit next to her other friends as usual, smiling and waving to him as she passes. Sarah is seventeen now, a senior. Soon she will be leaving for university, which one is yet to be decided.

The bus slows to a stop outside Charlie's house, about half of the bus is empty now. Sarah and Charlie both step off the bus, but rather than head across the road to her house, she walks towards Charlie's house in silence. They walk side by side, matching strides easily. This has become a daily occurrence.

Sarah sits at the table on the covered porch as she reaches for Charlie's backpack. She opens it and pulls out the crumpled worksheet, giving Charlie a look. Not one of surprise, but a look that says 'come on, we talked about this.' Despite this, she gives him a small smile as he sits across from her. She begins to look over what they learned today.

"Let's start with history today," she suggests. Charlie simply nods his head.

"So, you are starting on the World War 2 unit," she starts. "The war began in 1939 but the United States didn't get involved until...". Charlie's attention drifts off. He turns his head to watch the distant clouds as they race across the sky, grazing the tops of the mountains in the distance. Someone else may see a beautiful landscape, but Charlie can only feel dread, the unrelenting kind. As if someone or something is lurking, he knows they are, the only question is when they will strike. The birds flying south tell him to flee, just as the ants earlier told him to hide.

He manages to pull his attention back to Sarah as she continues to teach him what she can.

“...U-boats, German submarines, patrolled the Atlantic Ocean, destroying many American boats full of soldiers and supplies that were trying to reach England,” she states matter-of-factly.

Charlie tries to pay attention for as long as possible, but it is hard to pay attention even when it is Sarah talking. He focuses on her face, the way her expressions change as she goes through the history of World War 2. She looks fascinated as she describes the events, how the world changed and women were “not only allowed but encouraged to work!” Her eyes are full of interest and a passion for learning. Her voice fluctuates dramatically as she recounts the story, almost as if it were a fiction story she was reading to a child rather than a world history summary from a textbook. Charlie is mesmerized by her, by everything she does, and he always has been. He wants to reach out and hold her hand or brush a strand of hair from her face. His hand itches, almost as if his hand itself is yearning for it. Yet, he doesn't, because he knows what would follow. Betrayal. Rejection. Misery. He knows these are the only outcomes. In his mind, Charlie has pictured it many times. Maybe they would be happy at first, if she didn't reject him, but the voices in the back of his mind tell Charlie that it would never work. The only way it can end is Sarah leaving him.

Out of the corner of his eyes, he can see Max. He looks the same as always, the never-ending expression of mocking over his face. Charlie can imagine everything he would say, as if he has heard it a hundred times before. Because he has. Max's mocking never seems to go away, there is always something to critique. Something to comment

on. If Charlie listened to Max, he would never leave the house, never try to spend time with Sarah anymore. “It’s not worth it,” he would say. “She doesn’t even like you anyway, why would she.” Charlie already knows that they wouldn’t work, he doesn’t need to hear it from Max as well.

Charlie pulls his attention away from the thoughts of relationship despair, desperate to put the thoughts out of his mind, if only for a few minutes. The thoughts do not go away. It is as if they are pressing on him, constantly beating the wall that he put up, a wall that is so broken down and battered that there is no way to escape thoughts for long. The voices come from inside the wall, coaxing the thoughts back into the forefront of his mind, replaying tales of his inevitable misery and hopelessness.

The clouds seem to mirror Charlie’s mood, darkening into a vortex as they condense. Towering, dark and looming as they move across the sky. Deep within the storm above the mountains, further than the eye can see, the winds pick up and static energy accumulates.

Back on the ground, the clouds look dark and angry, but there is no hint of the turmoil occurring within.

Sarah taps his arm lightly, “Charlie?” she asks.

He looks at her expectantly.

“Did you get all of that?”

He nods.

“You understood it?” she asks again.

Once again, the only indication given of his understanding is a nod of his head. She looks as if she is waiting for a verbal response. Charlie doesn't feel like giving one, a nod is good enough.

“Okay, I guess,” she states, hesitant.

“I have to head home. Mom will be getting dinner ready soon and I promised to help tonight.”

Charlie looks at her, expression unchanging. She gives up on waiting for a response, knowing that it probably won't happen as long as she waits. He seems to speak less and less, meaning that each word spoken is worth more.

Sarah stands to pack up her stuff and Charlie follows suit, placing his history book back into his backpack as she picks up her bag.

“Bye Charlie,” she begins, startled as she turns around to see Charlie standing next to her. She gives him a quick hug. It's just a side hug, normal for them since they were children, but it is enough to draw Charlie out of his isolation, even if for only a minute.

“See you tomorrow,” Sarah finishes as she steps off the porch.

“Bye.”

It is enough to put a small smile on Sarah's face as she walks away from the house. She turns to wave, catching sight of Claire in the window.

The last few years have aged Claire. Her hair remains curly, but grey emerges at the roots, small lines on her skin begin to make her look older than her age. At only forty-

one, Claire is younger than Sarah's own mother, but it is clear that Cara leaving for college soon has taken its toll on her.

Smile lines are evident, reminiscent of the countless happy moments. At this moment though, a look of worry sits on Claire's face. The quick smile she gives Sarah after she waves is dropped as she looks back to her son.

As Sarah turns her focus back to the path ahead of her, Charlie removes his attention from her retreating form and looks out at the clouds once again. The haunting feeling of gloom returning as they advance, mirroring anguish in his eyes.

Claire watches out the window. She watches the change in her son as Sarah disappears from sight. She sees his attention shift and a darker look overtakes his face, one of a drifting soul. Someone who is lost.

It is quite obvious to Claire that her son is in love with Sarah. He always has been, a thought that used to make her cheerful. It was clear that he was happier with her around, their friendship taking on a life of its own, an adventure for them to discover. But that was when they were younger. It is not that Claire doubts Charlie having feelings for Sarah, or even that she doubts Sarah may reciprocate those feelings. Rather, she sees Charlie's continued withdrawal from the world. He is still happy when Sarah is around, still pleasant to his family, but growing more reserved by the day. A smile on his face has become rare, even when Sarah is around. When she isn't, it is almost as if he is indifferent to everything and everyone.

As she continues to observe, Charlie's expression changes again, this time to one of indifference. The look of despair was only in place for mere seconds before being

wiped clean, resembling a blank piece of paper, or rather a blank slate of stone.

Unchanging, vacant.

Chapter 5

Charlie awakens suddenly that night. Not full of fear, not anger, not sadness. Only slight dread, but even that shouldn't have been enough to wake him compared to the dread he experienced all day. A flash of lightning occurs outside, rumbling thunder shakes his windows simultaneously. The thunder continues to ring in his ears, the sound quieting as the waves travel further away. It is quiet again, except this time Charlie can distinguish the sound of rain as it hits the roof of their home.

He lies back down in bed, rustling around as he tries to get comfortable. Once he is as comfortable as he can get, he stares up at the ceiling. The pillow under his head uneven and the blankets strewn haphazardly across the bed. The pitter-patter of rain is calming.

Almost.

A darker sound can be heard underneath the pitter-patter. An uneven sound of crackles and pops. Charlie's mind races as he racks his brain to figure out what it is. It is a sound he has heard before, he's sure of it.

As the orange-tinted light falling into the room flickers slightly, Charlie realizes there is something wrong.

The sound is one of destruction, one of fire.

He is frozen in place, unable to move a muscle. Even breathing is a struggle. His eyes remain open, unable to rush to the window and see what is happening.

As Charlie remains paralyzed, he hears the beginnings of someone moving around in the house. Possibly Cara, as she has the room closest to his own. The sound of a door slamming open echoes faintly throughout the house, followed by Cara's panicked voice.

The next door to slam open is Charlie's. Cara rushes in, dragging him from his bed. He can tell that Cara is speaking, but not what she is saying, as if listening from underwater. He falls to the floor as she pulls him free of the covers and the mattress disappears from underneath him. His body hits the ground, limp upon impact, but stiffening once again as he hears the words leave Cara's mouth.

"Charlie! The barn is on fire, get up!" she demands.

Charlie doesn't move.

"Charlie! Get. Up. This is no time for your games," she screams at him.

Once again, Charlie doesn't move. Not because he doesn't want to, but because he can't. As though something is physically preventing movement. Vines made of dread thread around each of his limbs, holding him in place.

Cara looks at her brother once more, exasperated that he can't be bothered to snap out of his own mind even at a time like this. She begs him to get up, but his gaze remains glued to the ceiling.

Cara storms out of the room, leaving the door open when she leaves.

Another door opens, a rush of cold night air washes into his room, a hint of smoke doesn't let him forget what is happening outside. He wants to forget, to disappear. After what feels like hours, the vines begin to loosen. His fingers are the first to move,

twitching. It's small, but the rest of his arms and then his legs follow, until he is able to stand once again. The limited light that comes through the window continues to flicker with orange. The sound of crackling comes in freely through the open door, a small puddle of water begins to form just inside the entrance of the house.

Charlie stands, almost losing his balance at the speed. He grips the windowsill as his eyes trace the wisps of smoke that travel through the night sky. He can see shadows moving in front of a flaming form. A form that used to be a barn, a barn that is no more. Flames encase the building's frame, the middle of the ceiling is collapsing on itself. The rain does nothing to put out the flames.

Charlie rushes out the door, almost tripping over Stormy as she careens around the corner. Her claws slash into the wood. Her heterochromatic eyes are full of fright, almost as if Charlie can see the horrors of the fire reflected in them.

As he hurries towards the barn, a shadow moves in the distance to the right of the barn, just enough movement that Charlie can't decide if it was real or not. He tries to focus on it but doesn't see anything.

"Charlie," Charles exclaims. "Go get more buckets from the shed!" he calls, pointing at the small outbuilding to the left.

Charlie rushes to the building, past the burning barn, hearing the shrill whine of Stanley trapped in his stall.

The shed door is unlocked and swinging open wildly in the wind. Charlie slips past it to grab both buckets. One bucket bangs against the doorframe as he exits the shed, only to be stopped by the image in front of him. Stanley has managed to escape the

building, galloping away as the last few sparks of ash fly off his coat. But that isn't what stopped Charlie in his tracks.

The shed sits to the left and behind the barn, the door facing north, past the burning structure, to see the forest to the right of the barn.

A figure stands at the edge of the forest, just in front of the tree line. A tattered shirt hangs from his thin frame, frayed shorts ending at his knees, a large boxy container held in a tight grip. A ruthless smirk on his face. Max.

Confusion rises in Charlie's mind, what is Max doing here? His thoughts are interrupted by his father's voice.

"Charlie, Come on. Hurry up!" Charles yells across the yard.

Charlie's feet move of their own accord as his mind races.

His body moves in stop motion, dropping the buckets and reaching for the hose to fill them up. Droplets of water hit his clothes and skin with every bucket-full sloshed onto the scorching flames, the droplets dry before they can soak into the cotton of his t-shirt.

~

Only a few hours later, the sun begins to rise. The flames have flickered out, the last glowing coal is stomped into the cold wet soil under Charlie's boot as he trudges away from the barn ruins. Behind him, remnants of the structure sway in the strong winds. A charred discolored metal desk frame sits surrounded by the smouldering remains of what had been Charles' livelihood, the family's livelihood. Scorched support beams stand, only held upright by the concrete anchoring them into the earth. Ash swirls in the air.

Back in his bed, Charlie stares up at the ceiling.

Max, why was Max there?

Red hot anger blooms in his chest as he realizes what he should have known. The container in Max's hand, a gas can. How quickly the fire consumed the barn.

Charlie's thoughts fly, mind racing like a galloping wild mustang.

Max must have started the fire.

Why else would he have been there?!

The barn burned so fast, something must have ignited it. Someone.

Chapter 6

The next few days went by slowly. The fire investigation came and went, no mention of arson or the fire being intentional.

When the fire chief came to inspect the scene, Charlie debated telling him that he knew who did it, that Max had been there. In the end, Charlie couldn't bring himself to tell the man. What if he was working with Max?

Instead, he asked questions. Questions about what could have started the fire, if there was anything suspicious or unusual found. The look the fire chief gave Charlie suggested that he didn't understand why the boy was so interested in the cause of the fire, that it was simply another storm and another fire. His face seemed to show confusion, but Charlie had suspected that it may have been well-masked malicious intent, he was working with Max.

He claimed it was due to faulty electrical wiring. The static created by lightning striking a nearby tree had sparked a fraying wire, igniting a flame, which quickly engulfed the dry hay in the building's loft. Charlie knew that was a lie. Over the years, he had developed a good sense of who was lying, who was working against him. This fire chief definitely was. The most likely reason, he was working with Max. He had to be, there was no way that the fire had started on its own.

~

It was night now, the darkness falling across the sky minute by minute matched the somber mood of the whole family. They ate tuna casserole in silence, each person too

involved in their own thoughts to speak. Cara sat staring out the window, watching the sun set over the mountains. Charles' gaze continued to be locked on his plate. Claire had been trying to keep the mood light, making small talk. She stopped quickly, realizing she was having a conversation with herself.

She looked around, stopping her gaze at the expression on her husband's face. On top of the fire, Stanley still had not reappeared. The insurance money would cover the costs to replace the barn and the office. They had enough savings to be okay until the barn was rebuilt and Charles' business was up and running again, but nothing could fill the hole left by Stanley's disappearance. When he had managed to break down the weakening walls and escape the fire, it had been a relief to everyone, but they had expected him to show up the next day. When he didn't, they thought maybe he would the next, but now five days have passed and he is still nowhere to be seen. After the first day, the town had gathered together to search the surrounding woods for the horse. The team was large at first, but volunteers and helpers were dwindling each day as everyone realized that it was less and less likely he would be found. The mountain range past the woods is treacherous. The different paths between the peaks endless and the paths leading upwards full of dangerous chasms and slippery trails, many parts covered with the remnants of dangerous landslides.

Claire reached out to grab Charles' hand, a silent gesture meant to convey comfort and sympathy, a symbol of hope that everything would turn out okay.

Charlie watched the exchange silently. He was not eager to speak, but the silence at the table was new and unnerving. Everyone felt unsettled, Charlie most of all. Stanley's disappearance had taken its toll on everyone. Although Charlie had not spent as

much time with the horse lately, the sadness and fear of never feeling at bond again was almost overwhelming. On top of Stanley's absence, Charlie's investigation hasn't been going well. He had done some investigating of his own lately, looked for signs of Max's involvement. He hadn't found anything yet. Up until the fire, Max had been showing up a lot more, more than he had since Charlie was a child, but now he hasn't been around in the last five days. While it was a nice break from the boy, Charlie didn't take it as a good sign. He was sure the boy would show up again any moment, ready to cause more problems. Charlie stopped before turning any corner, searching the air for breath sounds or anything to indicate that Max was waiting to catch him.

When Max did appear again, Charlie would be ready. The heavy weight of metal in his pocket reminded him that Max would not get away, he would not get to torture Charlie anymore.

Chapter 7

Sarah showed up again today. She had shown up every day since the fire, which was over a week ago. She helped Claire cook, helped Charles and Cara clean up the rubble and drag away what little was left of the structure. But mostly, she sat with Charlie. She talked, sometimes he would reply. He only spoke one-word answers, but even that reminded her of their conversations from when they were kids. Because Charlie's lack of words made keeping the conversation going difficult, Sarah spoke of childhood memories, jumping from story to story.

“Do you remember that night we snuck out and went fishing in the river?” she starts.

“You caught that big catfish,” she continues, “the one that slapped you in the face with its tail when it finally jumped out of your hands. Then the next day you read me that story you wrote about how it was actually a ninja in disguise.” She laughs heartily, the sound of happiness ringing through the air. But today, the sound just barely managed to crack through the walls of his mind, quickly replaced by the voices in his head once again. Through the thick veils in his thoughts, her laugh sounded forced, distorted. Like she was only here because she thought she had to be, not because she wanted to be.

“Or when we used to save the frogs that fell down into my window well!” she moves on, voice flowing with happiness, “That one night when a big storm knocked down 4 of them.” She is cut off by the sound of Charlie's voice.

“You don't need to be here,” he states, monotone.

“What?” she asks, shocked by both the length of his statement and the words it consisted of.

“I said, you can leave. I don’t need you here.”

“But,” she pauses mid-sentence, confusion clear on her face, “why?”

“Just go.”

She stands. Obviously Charlie has been through a lot lately, but that does not give him an excuse to shoo her away without reason.

“Tell me why. Then I’ll leave.”

Charlie remains silent. Sarah crouches down to his level. She doesn’t lose her temper or raise her voice often, but she has dealt with a lot from him lately and it is getting to be too much. They have been friends since childhood, the least he could do is explain why he suddenly doesn’t want her around.

“I am not leaving.”

Around her, the air hangs stagnant, waiting for a response. None comes. He doesn’t even look at her, staring off into the distance.

“Charlie, I swear,” she is cut off again.

“You are just distracting me from looking for him,” Charlie states vehemently, yet his expression does not change.

“Who? Looking for Stanely?” she demands, “I told you already that I would help you look for him. Two sets of eyes will be better than one.”

“No,” a pair of empty dull eyes stare back at her, ones that vaguely remind her of her childhood.

All the anger drains from her body, she sinks to sit next to him again.

“Max?” Her voice comes out quiet, uneasy.

The quick, almost imperceptible grimace on Charlie’s face tells her that she was right.

“Charlie. I thought you understood, Max isn’t ...” she stops herself.

“I thought you hadn’t seen him in a long time,” she continues, grabbing Charlie’s hand lightly in her own.

She speaks with hesitation, “He left.”

“He didn’t.” Charlie’s voice so devoid of emotion, connection. If Sarah hadn’t been watching him as his mouth moved to form the words, she would have thought they appeared out of thin air. The voice sounded nothing like that of her childhood friend.

Charlie continues to sit on the steps as Sarah remains silent next to him. Neither makes a sound for a few minutes. Sarah was the only one who knew that Charlie still hung out with Max at the age of twelve. The older he got, the more people were concerned. When he was eleven, Charles and Claire sat him down at the kitchen table to talk. They tried to tell Charlie that Max wasn’t real, that he was an “imaginary friend.” At the time, Charlie couldn’t understand why they would think that, why they couldn’t see Max. Imaginary friends were just made-up people, lacking details, but Max stood next to them as they talked, just as detailed and real as they were.

After over thirty minutes of the conversation, Charlie gave up. At Max's suggestion, he acted like he understood that Max was imaginary, and that he wasn't really there. Claire and Charles accepted this, happy that their son could finally let go of his childhood beliefs and move forward. He didn't bring up Max around them anymore, but he didn't go away. Charlie quickly found that it was easier to let people think that Max wasn't around anymore. By the time Charlie turned twelve, the only one who still knew about Max was Sarah. She had been dismissive about it at first, but eventually, even she became suspicious. As Max stood next to her while she spoke to Charlie at the bus stop on a cold snowy winter morning, Charlie told her that he knew Max was imaginary, that he hadn't seen him, that he had left. It would be easier that way, Max had told him so.

It wasn't until later that year that Max had explained it to Charlie. Anyone who tried to tell Charlie that Max wasn't real was lying. They said that because they didn't like Max. Often, that also meant they didn't like Charlie. That was the year that Charlie began to be more wary of those around him. He became cautious. Anyone could turn against him at any time, he never knew who was on his side. It was safer to assume that everyone was against him than run the risk of being betrayed. It was that mindset that stuck with Charlie to this day.

Despite this, it wasn't until recently that Charlie realized not even Max was on his side. As they got older, Max was less and less of a friend, more like a nagging voice of destruction that followed Charlie around. Charlie had begun to despise the other boy, but knowing that he wasn't here anymore and wondering where that meant he would show up next was worse.

Sarah removed her hand from his silently, giving him a small hug before she stood up.

“I’ll come over after I get back from the university tour on Wednesday, we can talk more then. See you in a few days,” she states with a small smile before turning to walk away. A dark sadness still covers her heart, worry, but she knows that Charlie will not want to talk about it. Instead, she walks home, trying not to think about it for now.

Chapter 8

Knocking wakes Charlie up. He had fallen asleep at the table. Without Sarah around to help him with his schoolwork, either Charles or Claire have sat with him the last day or two to get him to at least try to complete his work, not that it has been successful.

The front door isn't visible from his seat at the table, but he doesn't care very much. His head starts to lean back onto the table and go back to sleep, but his descent into a peaceful dreamless state is stopped abruptly. It is not the voice at the door, although it is one he recognizes well. Rather, what grabs his attention is the question it asks, tone laced with worry.

"Have you seen Sarah?" the voice asks

s. It was Sarah's mother, Heather.

"Did she come here when she got back?" Heather questions again before giving Claire a chance to answer the first.

"No. I haven't seen her today," Claire states, voice calm although slight frown lines are sure to be forming on her forehead.

"She was supposed to be back early this afternoon," Heather states, "I thought maybe she was running a little late or maybe just came over here first, but it's getting late. If she is not here then I don't know where she is."

Charlie glances at the clock above the stove, it is 9 pm already. The worry is clear on Heather's face as he leaves the table to get closer to the pair.

“You haven’t seen her?” She questions him, to which he replies with a simple shake of his head.

“I need to go searching for her. Claire, will you please keep a lookout?” Heather asks.

“Yes, of course! Where are you going to search?”

“You have my number, right? Call me if you see her please.” Heather’s words flowing too quick for a response. “I am going to drive up to the university and see if she maybe decided to stay there with Megan another day.” Megan is one of Sarah’s friends from camp. They were to drive there separately and meet up on campus before the tour, staying in a local hotel for a night or two to catch up.

“I’m sure that is all it is,” Claire states to reassure her friend.

“I swear, that girl is going to give me a heart attack,” Heather states, beginning to calm slightly.

“Call us when you find her,” Claire states, “I’ll give you a call if we see her here.”

~

That night, Charlie barely slept. The university Sarah had gone to was over three hours away so he knew that they wouldn’t hear from Heather for a few hours but he was restless. Something didn’t feel right, he hadn’t felt right all day. Like something was off or missing, he wasn’t sure what though. *It must just be that Sarah isn’t home yet*, he thought, *it will go away when I see her tomorrow*. Knowing that the night would be a

long one, he tried to fall asleep around 11 pm. He tossed and turned all night, trying to find a comfortable position to no avail.

It was around 5 am when Charlie had heard the house phone ring and go unanswered, followed by his mother's blaring cell ringtone. Muffled voices come from his parent's room, followed by footsteps on the creaking floor as someone paced in the halls.

"Heather, I am so sorry." Claire's voice quaked with sorrow, "Yes, I will tell him tomorrow. please let me know if there is anything I can do for you."

Then the house was quiet. A rift of despair opened up in Charlie's heart, although he wasn't sure why yet. His heart felt like it had been beaten beyond repair. The blood pounding in his ears proved that the organ still performed its physical function, but the searing pain in the center of his chest made him wonder what the tissue would look like upon inspection. Would it be torn or scratched? Would the layers be pulled apart and tattered? Or rather, would it look completely normal? After all, the heart was not truly the center of emotion. And even if it was, he had not heard anything to confirm the worst had come. Perhaps the reaction was preemptive, unwarranted. If what Charlie felt in his chest was true, his life would never be the same. The sadness and sorrow in his mother's voice only strengthened the uneasiness in his mind, causing his soul to feel empty. A heavy hollow feeling overtook his consciousness. The blanket of silence was a welcome one, as it saved him from hearing the sorrowful cries of his mother down the hall.

Eventually, Charlie fell into a fitful sleep, sounds of terror-filled screams and the sound of screeching metal and splintering wood occupied his mind until he was awoken

in the morning. Upon opening his eyes, Charlie was met by the view of his mother. A mug placed in each hand as she stood in the door frame, the smell of chamomile tea radiated from one, while the strong scent of coffee wafted from the other. Her face was free of makeup, her eyes slightly red, possibly a bit puffy. The look she gave him was one of thinly veiled agony, despair, and sorrow all wrapped into one.

“Charlie,” her voice shook, “I need to talk to you. I was thinking maybe we could sit on the porch with some coffee and tea like we used to.”

Although the gesture was nice, they hadn’t done that since Charlie was ten. He wanted to know what was wrong, what would cause her to act this way, yet he didn’t want to move. He wasn’t able to. It was like his body knew what was coming, even if his mind hadn’t caught up yet.

A few minutes passed in silence.

“Come on out when you are ready. I’ll let your tea cool off for a few minutes and wait for you on the porch.”

Trying to move his body was like lifting wet, heavy concrete. When he finally got to sitting on the edge of his bed, a sudden wave of nausea caused him to lean over his legs. He managed to keep down the vomit trying to creep its way up his throat.

The house was quiet as he stood up. Exiting his room, he could hear the slight sound of melancholy music coming from Cara’s room. As he passed the room, she looked up to see him, a sad look of pity filled her gaze.

Not wanting to feel her pity or speak with her about whatever made her pity him so much, he rushed past the room, out into the kitchen. From there, he could see his mother as she sat on the porch chair with her head in her hands and two steaming mugs sitting on the table next to her.

He opened the porch door and sat at the chair across the table from his mother. She quickly wiped her face with her sleeve and slid the mug of tea over to him.

“Here you go honey,” she stated in a voice that was a bit too cheery to match the expression resting on her face. Were her eyes even puffier than they had been just minutes ago?

Together, they sat for a few minutes, sipping their drinks silently as the sun raised higher into the sky, causing the shadows of the house to slowly shrink.

Claire looked at Charlie, her face steeled as she prepared herself for what she would have to tell him.

“Charlie,” she started, “Sarah was in an accident on her way home from the university.” The look she receives from him is blank, as he tries internally to prevent what he knows is coming.

“She died.”

Chapter 9

When Claire told him, nothing happened for a long minute or two. Tears stream down her face as she watches what was left of her son crumple to pieces. He didn't show emotion anymore, even before the news, but she had seen the last of the happiness drain from his eyes. The color leaves his face, his head sinks to gaze at the floor. Claire reaches for his hands in a comforting way, both of which are wrapped tightly around the mug of tea that was growing colder by the minute.

At the unexpected human contact, Charlie jerks backwards. The mug drops swiftly to the ground, shattering as it hits the wood boards of the porch. Cold tea splashes out of the cup and seeps into Charlie's socks, chilling him to the bone. His head snaps up to meet Claire's eyes, eyes of a mother that would do anything within her power to help her son with this enormous grief.

In this moment, however, Charlie did not see any resemblance between this woman and the mother who raised him. He no longer saw the loving mother who packed his lunch box full of his favorite snacks or helped him learn how to read. What he saw, was a liar.

She has to be lying, he thought initially.

When the shatter of glass registers in Claire's mind, she rushes forward to make sure Charlie was not hurt by the glass. The sudden movement startles Charlie, even more than the hand that had touched his. He quickly stands from the chair, knocking it over in haste, and sidesteps to avoid the woman's touch.

“Oh Charlie. Are you alright?” Claire’s voice rings, quieting as she sees the reaction of the boy. Charlie looks at her as if she is a stranger, a look that pierces her heart like a piece of ice-cold steel.

“Honey,” she tries, beginning to reach for her son’s hand.

Charlie enters the house in a rush, heading down the hallway to enter his bedroom. Slamming it and clicking the lock before leaning his back against the door and sliding down to the ground. If Charlie had been anyone else, sobs would be wracking his body and tears would leave salty warm trails down his cheeks. Maybe he would have even hugged his mother, sought out comfort as he came to the reality that he would never see his best friend, the girl he had been hopelessly in love with, ever again.

But Charlie, Charlie knew better. Sarah... She cannot be dead. The woman was lying, there was no other explanation.

For the rest of the day, Claire and Charles tried their best to get Charlie to open the door, to talk to them. No matter what they said or did, the door remained locked, unmoving.

The second day, Charles had enough. He walked out to the shed to grab his tools as Claire begged him not to do it. She tried to convince him, along with herself, that Charlie would come out on his own. As the hours passed, Charles’ resolve strengthened, that door was opening. Claire’s voice sounded weaker each time she tried to convince her husband that Charlie would unlock the door of his own volition, “any minute now.” Eventually, Claire had no desire to come up with another argument for her husband’s actions as Charles held the drill against the door handle and bore into it, breaking the lock

mechanism. Once the lock was broken, it was easy to use a small screwdriver to release the lock. The door swung open in response.

Along the wall on the opposite side of the room, sat Charlie. An impassive expression on his face, staring at the floor as if he did not even notice the commotion around him.

Both Claire and Charles tried to speak to their son, even Cara tried to snap him out of his stupor. Nothing worked.

Every once in a while, Charlie would stand up and shuffle to a different location, be it a different corner of the room, the bed, or the small chair.

Charles had removed the now broken doorknob, leaving a gaping hole in the door and causing the door to swing gently open and closed as it chose, as there was nothing to hold it in its place. Charlie's mind remained blank. No thoughts, no feelings, nothing. If he couldn't feel, then he wouldn't need to feel the pain that would inevitably be there, if what the woman told him was true. Charlie crawled deeper and deeper into his own consciousness, leaving behind only a shell, a ghost of a human being.

~

The light streaming in from the windows changed to gold and eventually disappeared entirely.

“Charlie,” Claire begins. “Sarah’s funeral is tomorrow,” she states softly. “It is at 2 o’clock at the church. We are all going to leave here around 1:30.”

The only response is a murmured “no” that barely has enough force to leave Charlie’s lips.

Claire sighs sadly as she takes a moment to look at the boy who was once the most joyful child she had ever seen.

Chapter 10

The day of Sarah's funeral, Charlie could not bring himself to speak. The day was dreary and dark. Gloomy clouds filled the sky, yet not a drop of rain touched the ground in their little valley. The funeral was at 2, but at 1:30 the sun had still yet to show itself. Despite the fact that it was already early afternoon, Charlie hadn't left his bed all day. The breakfast Claire had left on his bedside table sat untouched, much like the chicken pot pie which had sat, unwanted, in the same location all night. Charlie hadn't eaten in two days, that's how long it's been since he found out Sarah was dead.

She had died in a car crash sometime Wednesday afternoon. He had found out on Thursday morning, it was now Saturday.

At 1:45, Claire entered Charlie's room once more.

"We are heading out now," she stated, voice impossibly soft. "Are you sure you don't want to come with?" questions her hesitant voice. After a few long seconds of silence, her voice grows braver. "You know she would want you there Charlie. I know it's hard to face but Sarah would have wanted you there."

Again, no response. *Dead people don't get to want things*, Charlie thought.

"You don't need to do anything, don't need to talk at all. Please, just come with us," pleads Claire as she watches the unchanging expression on her son's face.

She sighs heavily, turning to leave with a heart that feels like lead.

"Well... we will be back in a few hours."

Claire's voice may as well have been met by deaf ears, Charlie had stopped listening. He couldn't hear anyone talk about Sarah or what she would have wanted anymore. His best friend, his only friend, was dead. The girl he loved was dead. Nothing would make it better.

Minutes pass, the door closes and a car can be heard starting up before gravel crunches as it turns down the road that leads to the town's small church. No doubt the church is filled to the brim with mourners, everyone had loved her.

When the news hit town, no one could believe the sweet girl was gone. She had grown up here, lived her life around these people and touched each and every one of their lives. She called homes from the veterinarian's office to let children know that their beloved pet was doing okay when they had to stay overnight, carried dozens of baked goods from Gloria's bakery down the road when there had been a school bakesale or fundraiser. To everyone in town, she had been an irreplaceable soul. To Charlie, she had been everything. Now that she was gone, life was nothing.

Charlie was in a trance of sorts, unable to move, unable to control his thoughts as they raced through his mind, unable to react. His face remained unmoving, flat, as he sat in his bed.

Across the room, a shadow flitted as a figure placed itself in the door frame.

A tattered grey shirt and frayed tan shorts. Messy hair that touches just above the individual's eyebrows, a ruthless mocking expression filling their face.

"Aww poor wittle Charlie." A voice singsongs, a tone reminiscent of those used when speaking with a baby.

“Come on,” it begins, “Get up. Let’s have some fun.” A malicious smile overtakes the face.

The voice is met by silence, but Charlie is perfectly aware of what is being said and who is saying it. Body still unmoving, face still expressionless, but there is a fire alight in his eyes, one of anger. The heavy weight that has remained within reach ever since the fire seems to burn through the pocket of his jeans.

“Oh my god, can you just get over it already? You are better off without her away.” Max states, “She didn’t love you back and she never would. I did you a favor.”

‘I did you a favor,’ the ruthless boy had stated. At first, Charlie didn’t understand what he could have meant, what ‘favor’? Did he mean burning the barn? No, that didn’t make any sense. But what else could he have meant?

Red. The vicious color overtakes the edges of Charlie’s vision as the meaning of Max’s words registers.

“No, you couldn’t have,” Charlie states, his voice shaky.

“Ha,” voice full of amusement, “Do I really have to explain it?”

“Fine,” he breathes an exasperated sign, “your proof.”

“Her car was found in the ditch about 100 miles south of the university,” Max continues, “it had hit a tree, totaling the car and knocking the tree down. Sarah was found a few meters from the car, ejected upon impact. Is that enough for you, or do you want to hear more?”

The statement was met with silence. Max was right, that was the same scene which he had heard described by multiple townspeople who had gathered the day after the accident to console Sarah's mother. That day, almost everyone in town had stopped by to give their apologies to Heather, they brought casseroles and meatloaf, mashed potatoes and stuffing, brownies and chocolate Anything to give Heather, as if that would soften the blow, or rather the explosion, of grief. Heather had been too overwhelmed to be alone that day, she had spent her time sitting next to Claire on the porch. After people had offered their condolences, they walked around in groups, meandering their way back to the road while talking about the accident and sharing what they knew. Their path back to the road had led them straight past the window into Charlie's room. Charlie had been able to catch glimmers of information through the open window and piece together how the scene had looked. But how did Max know about that?

"Ahh I see the gears in your brain turning, even if it is agonizingly slow. How about I speed that up for you," Max starts. "I know because I was there. I know because I was the reason she swerved off the road."

The shock hits Charlie first, and by the time it wears off he is up off the bed, knife in hand, as he lunges at Max. Max avoids the swing of the blade easily. Charlie lurches forward again, his full weight behind the jab. This time, the weapon meets something, but not its target. The blade is embedded into the wooden dresser next to the doorway.

Charlie yanks on the knife to remove it from the wood, but the whole drawer comes with it, sending Charlie careening backwards onto the floor. Max stands just inches from where the knife had struck the dresser, a fiendish glint in his eyes and a wicked chuckle leaving his lips.

“I thought you were better than this Charlie,” Max mocks, “you are better off. I’ll accept a ‘Thank you’ anytime now.”

Charlie moves the drawer out of his way, leaving the knife embedded, and straightens his back before bending his knees, preparing to lunge.

“Ugh, don’t do this now,” Max continues. “Just stop attacking me already. We are basically the same person. Why do you think I have stuck around for so long, why I still show up. It’s because you want me here, because we are more alike than you are willing to admit.”

“No, you are wrong. You will pay for Sarah.” Charlie states vehemently, the volume of his voice rising with each distinctive word. With that, he lunges. The beautiful blown glass lamp he grabs from its place on the dresser flies across the room, somehow missing Max once again. It shatters against the wall, mere inches from Max’s arm.

“She didn’t love you, she never would have. Now you can get on with your life without that bitch.”

Max wears a mocking, if not slightly annoyed, expression as he watches Charlie prepare to lunge again.

Charlie falls to the floor as Max seems to disappear from the room entirely. The shards of glass slicing through his skin mean nothing as his gaze searches the room for Max.

In the background, the front door shuts and quiet voices fill the silence.

“Charlie,” the soft voice of his mother calls, “how are you doing?”

As she enters the room, her sharp vision focuses on the broken glass surrounding her son's form, the drops of blood dripping from his forearms onto the once clean carpet as he jumps to his feet, his eyes wild.

Chapter 11

The machine next to him beeps, a repetitive, insistent sound that is beginning to grate on his already frazzled nerves. The wires seem endless. Some connect to stickers placed on his chest, while another connects to a cuff wrapped around his arm which inflates and deflates periodically. The last wire connects to a small sticker consisting of a red light placed on his right index finger. A long thin tube hangs from a machine attached to a tall pole, the machine beeping rapidly. A collection of pristine white gauze is wrapped around both forearms

Next to Charlie, his mother is asleep, curled up on the scratchy-looking couch. Other than the bed, the small couch, and necessary monitoring equipment, the room is bare. The floor is tile, an off-white color with thin black wheel streaks sporadically placed. The walls a soft tan color, with only two doors. The first door is solid, a dark brown color with a silver handle and a deadbolt lock. The second is the same dark brown, but with a small window. Heavy curtains hang from a metal track system near the door, where an empty counter sits.

The world around Charlie feels hazy, like he is seeing it through a veil. His eyes too heavy to open fully. He tries to move, managing only a small movement of his hand. He tried to lift his arm, but it is stopped by a force applied to his wrist. It takes all his energy to lift his head a few inches off the pillow. A blue and white band of fabric wraps around each wrist. His vision traces a white ribbon of fabric to the crease between the mattress and the brackets on each side. How had he not noticed it before?

Minute by minute, Charlie's vision gets better and his movements get stronger. A few tugs against the restraints around his wrists prove that they must be connected somewhere under the bed.

The blanket around his lower body feels too warm, not at all calming against the panic beginning to rise in his mind. His legs become restless, trying to remove the blanket. The movement starts small, just trying to move his feet from under the blanket, but his movements grow with the panic and become frantic.

The new noise draws Claire from her sleep, eyes bleary as she gains her bearings of the world around her.

Charlie, awake, but thrashing against the restraints in the bed. She rushes towards the hospital bed.

"Charlie," she says softly.

"Charlie," she tries again, louder this time.

His panicked eyes turn to his mother, the eyes of cornered prey. The trashing ceases, but only for a moment.

Before either of them can react, the door bursts open, causing the trashing to begin once again, and a nurse rushes in.

With one look at the beeping machine, she knows what had happened. The Versed bag was empty, the tubing dry. She wasn't sure how she had not heard the beeping pump from outside the room, but this afternoon had been more chaotic than ever

in the halls. With one look at the boy's wrist, she could see skin irritation already forming from his trashing against the restraints. The beeping pump could wait.

"Amanda," the nurse calls, "I need 2 mg of Ativan, now."

She grabs Charlie's arm closest to her as it trashes in the air, gently pressing it back down to the mattress with just enough force to hold it to the bed, not enough to hurt him.

"Ma'am, I need you to step away from the bed," she states firmly to Claire.

"No," Claire argues. "Charlie! Charlie honey it's okay," she continues, but Charlie's eyes are no longer on her, glazed as he whips his head to look around the room, left arm still moving frantically against the restraints.

"Ma'am, I know this is scary but he will be okay. I cannot do anything to help him unless you give us space." The nurse tries again, before calling out once more, "Rob, I could use some help in here."

"Mom," Charlie struggles, "They are gonna hurt me! If they take me I won't swim back, I can't swim! The tsunami will take it."

"He is just scared," Claire begins, tears welling up in her eyes, "Let me talk to him."

"Help me, don't let them take me!... Take the rope, it will save her! Blubephe." The words leave Charlie's mouth in a string of panicked sounds.

A man in the same color scrubs rushes into the room, looking around quickly before crossing the room to hold Charlie's left arm to the mattress

“Charlie, you need to calm down,” Claire cries, tears running down her cheeks as she maneuvers around the second nurse to reach the head of her son’s bed, still unable to get her son’s attention as his eyes flicker between the two nurses in the room.

Another nurse enters the room, an empty vial in her hand and a syringe full of clear liquid. She turns to the computer quickly to scan something before moving to maneuver the tubing connected to Charlie’s arm.

“Ma’am,” the first nurse states again, “We need to give him a medication to calm down before he hurts himself pulling against the restraints.”

Finally, Claire backs away slightly, unable to speak. She nods but keeps her hand placed lightly against her son’s cheek, the skin pale and clammy.

“Charlie, I know this is scary but it will be okay, you will be okay, we are taking care of you,” the first nurse states to Charlie, her voice a bit softer than when she spoke to Claire but still clear that there was no room for argument.

“How did this even happen?” the nurse giving the medication asks.

“The Versed ran dry,” the first nurse replies as Charlie’s struggling calms.

Charlie turns his head to look at his mother as his eyes begin to feel heavy and the hands holding his own release him.

Through blurry vision, he can see tears streaming down his mother’s face as one of the nurses nears her.

“Claire,” she begins, “let’s talk about…” her voice drowns out as Charlie sees the form of Max, waving to him as his eyes shut, drifting back into a sleep that is far from restful.

~

In the days to follow, Charlie woke up multiple times. Either in a panic or in a state of complete numbness. His mind was restless, unable to tell what was a dream and what was real. No concept of time and no idea what was going on around him. He had moved rooms, that much he knows. He overheard a man’s voice saying “We think we finally have a good mix of medications,” whatever that meant.

~

When Charlie woke up the next morning, there were no machines beeping next to him, no wires or tubes. The room was empty, no sofa or curtains. The floor was the same off-white, the walls and doors almost identical. This time though, the room had a window. There seemed to be a wire mesh placed within the glass, but it didn’t obstruct the view much. The sun was rising and judging by the distance from the empty streets below, the room was likely on the second or third floor of the building.

Charlie’s mind was quiet, so quiet that he almost wished for its normal chaos. Although his mind was calm, the crushing weight of his own thoughts still held a tight grip. For the first time Charlie could remember, his mind was calm, no voices pushed against the veils and walls. And yet, Charlie could not relax, still could not feel entirely

comfortable in his own thoughts, as if someone or something else was still there, held back but not gone, watching.

Charlie watched as the sun rose, sitting still at first but he began to pace as the quiet became stifling.

“Hello Charlie,” a cheery voice states from the door.

“My name is Valarie, I’m your nurse for today.”

Silence follows, Valarie watches Charlie, as if she was waiting for a response, while she logs in to the computer she had wheeled in with her.

“Charlie?” she begins, “I need to do a quick assessment, then we can get you your meds. Okay?”

“Umm, ok,” came Charlie’s quiet response, barely a whisper, his voice hoarse from lack of use.

“Can you tell me your name and birthday?” Valarie asks.

Charlie answers in the same tone as before, and Valarie continues to ask questions like “What year is it?” and “Who is the President?” while briefly hooking him up to a few wires and listening to his chest, writing down numbers periodically before removing the wires and getting out a small bag of medications.

“I don’t have too many medications for you today, just two. Seroquel and Ativan,” she stated, placing them into a small cup, oblivious to the rising panic in Charlie’s chest

“No,” Charlie stated with fear, “blubephe! I won’t take it!” Charlie began running his hands through his hair anxiously.

“Charlie,” Valarie stated calmly, “I need you to calm down. I won’t make you take them but you need to talk to me. Please.”

Charlie gingerly took a seat on the bed before standing and resuming pacing.

“The one with an A, I won’t take it! Blubephe! Last time they used it to knock me out! They were after me, you are working with them! I know it!”

“Charlie,” Valarie began once again, “Charlie! It is okay, this won’t knock you out, I promise.”

“But,” he stuttered, “you could be lying.” His voice became quieter with each word, sliding against the wall to the floor, curling his knees into his chest, the bandages on his arms scraping roughly against the hospital gown.

“Charlie, this is your choice. If you do not want to take the Ativan right now it’s okay. It would help you though,” She sighed, turning to type something on the computer. “I do need you to take the Seroquel, do you think you can do that?”

Cautiously, Charlie stood up and walked a few steps, sitting on the bed softly. Without a word, he nodded his head and slowly accepted the pill and a cup of water from Valarie. Tipping his head back, he got the pill down easily and drank as much water as he could, realizing his throat was parched.

“Thank you Charlie, I’ll let you relax and I’ll be back in a bit,” Valarie stated as she left the room, taking with her the cart of machines and even the now empty cup of water.

Chapter 12

The following days in the hospital had not gone so well for Charlie. They were constantly trying to give him medications that left his mind numb and slow, but never rid him of its crushing weight.

The day he left the hospital should have been one of the best days of his life, but as the car approached the house he once called home, he never wanted to return. The house Sarah and her mother used to occupy had a new 'for sale' sign in front of it. The only sign of life from the house was the couples and families coming to tour it. Heather had packed up the house and left, unable to deal with the weight of her daughter's death while occupying the same house she had lived in all of her life.

Upon returning home, Charlie discovered his room had been cleaned of shattered glass and the blood-stained carpet was replaced, but that could never erase what had happened in this room.

Thankfully, Max had not visited Charlie since the day he woke up in the hospital, and even then Charlie couldn't be sure he had really been there, as he had barely seen enough through the haze to be sure that it was him.

Another change was that Cara's room was empty now. In the weeks during Charlie's hospital stay, Cara had to leave for college. It was only her first year but she needed to be on campus all summer for soccer practice and training. She had chosen a school over five hours away and wouldn't be home again until Thanksgiving in November. The house was quiet without her, her room no longer leaked music into the hallway or allowed a rogue soccerball into the walkspace.

The medical bills swamping the family forced Claire to get a job, so she started working as a bank teller full time during the week, meaning that Charlie spent his days home alone.

Now, every day was the same. Charlie woke up to his alarm and stumbled out of bed. He ate his breakfast silently while Claire and Charles talked animatedly. Each morning they would try to bring Charlie into their conversation and each morning it would fail after he only gave up a few words. By lunchtime, Charlie had spent his morning outside just watching the clouds move over the mountains or observing Stormy search for her next mousey prey. The afternoons were no different. The more time Charlie spent alone, the more he felt he would be better off on his own. The monotony, along with his parents' attempts to get him to talk to them, was wearing him thin. The walls of the house closed in every day, trapping him in his own misery.

While the medication meant to calm the voices in Charlie's head was working, it also left him feeling drained. As if his mind was a dark well that had been filled by rainstorms for years but was now sealed off, empty of all movement or life, a dark and gloomy place not fit for anyone to exist in.

Each day drug on more than the last. Summer turned into fall and school began, but Charlie didn't go. It wasn't as if Claire and Charles had decided to let him drop out, but they also couldn't find a way to make him go. They were afraid to push him, afraid that if they pushed him too far they would lose him completely.

It was October when Charlie decided he couldn't take it anymore. He had been planning to do it for a while but could never quite work up the nerve. He knew it

wouldn't be easy, but with Claire being gone at a conference all week, Charles had been a bit forgetful in making sure that Charlie had taken his medication, which he was resistant to at times. After a full three days free of the pills, Charlie's mind was feeling almost back to up to speed again.

After a silent breakfast, Charles headed out to the new barn to work on finishing the office and Charlie began to pack his bags.

The bus left at 10 am that morning. After stealing some money from his parents' safe to pay for the ticket, Charlie walked to the station and managed to get his ticket and board the bus minutes before departure. It was late that night when he finally arrived. The city was unlike anything he had ever seen before. The tall buildings, endless traffic, and minuscule alleyways he had only seen in magazines had now become his new home.

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Sleeping on the streets wasn't easy, but it was his only option if he didn't want to fight the crowds lining up at every homeless shelter in the area. If it got any colder, Charlie knew he would need to join the crowd, if for nothing more than a luke-warm meal or a warm place to sleep. At this point, he would happily accept day-old food from a mall restaurant. Anything to quell the rumbling ache of his stomach, to make the cold concrete he slept on a bit more tolerable. If food wasn't available, maybe someone there would be able to point him in the direction of a building with a warm vent facing unoccupied ground or a warm alleyway with good protection from the bone-chilling wind.

The days went by faster now, his mind completely clear from the months of medication, which coincided with Max making an appearance again. He hadn't shown up

much, but each time Charlie saw him his blood boiled. He had missed his chance at getting revenge in his old home, but he wouldn't miss that chance again.

It was a sunny Tuesday when Charlie saw Max for the last time. Charlie had been walking through the alleyways towards his favorite restaurant dumpster with his tattered backpack on his shoulder when he glimpsed a head of hair that was all too familiar to him. The boy never seemed to change his clothes and today was no exception, same shorts and T-shirt as he wore when they were children, if not a little worse for wear.

Blood pounded in Charlie's ears as rage built up inside him. The boy in front of him was responsible for every bad thing that had happened to him, a manifestation of evil itself, and Charlie would make him pay.

The end of the alleyway and the opening of the busy street was just ahead when Charlie lept on Max's back. He had made a mistake last time by letting Max know that he was going to attack, but he didn't make that mistake twice. The boys tumbled to the ground, rolling and throwing punches. They were out onto the street now and most people barely gave them a second glance, likely thinking homeless people fighting was normal. Charlie was sitting on top of Max's chest punching his face when he was knocked over by a force from behind him. Charlie looked around, expecting to see Max still lying on the concrete. Instead, blood covered the concrete, just as it did his knuckles, and a man in a biking helmet was rushing to Charlie's side.

"Boy, are you okay?" the man asked. "Damn people never watch where they are going here."

The man followed Charlie's panicked gaze as it rose from the blood on his hands to the blood-stained concrete, and finally to the alleyway, watching for any movement to indicate where Max had gone.

"Well I don't know what you are looking for, boy. Since you seem to be okay, I have to ask why you were punching the concrete like that," the man started. "What did it ever do to you?" he asked with a small hint of amusement in his voice.

"No, no, he was right here. Where did he go? I promised not to let him get away this time." Charlie stated, panic and anger combining into a dangerous combination in his voice.

"Who are you talking about? There was no one here," the man questioned.

"He was right there!" Charlie stated, a blaze lighting up his eyes.

The man's expression suddenly filled with recognition. He thought of the bike helmet in its place upon his head. The boy in front of him was a mirror image of himself years ago, living in the gloomy despair-filled shadow of this life all alone.

"Boy, what's your name?" the man asked, voice calm and quiet, hiding the sympathy for an individual in the same position he had once been in.

"Charlie," Charlie stated shortly, "I need to find someone. Bye."

As Charlie began to walk away, the man grabbed Charlie's hand. Charlie ripped his arm from the man's grasp, spinning to face him, expression empty and mind occupied.

“Charlie, my name is Oscar,” he began. “I will help you find who you are looking for, but I need to ask where your family is.”

Oscar’s expression softened further as he saw the threadbare backpack strapped to Charlie’s back and the dirt covering his skin. The boy couldn’t have been more than seventeen and yet here he was on the streets, alone in more ways than one. Eyes blank, flat expression, holding himself as if the whole world was against him, he probably felt as though it was. The likeness between this boy and himself was striking.

“Not here.” Charlie stated firmly.

Charlie remained in his place, unmoving in the busy traffic of the city. It was at that moment that Charlie’s hunger decided to make itself known. The loud rumbling growl from his abdomen proved once again that he had not eaten a full meal in days.

“Let me at least buy you some food?” Oscar asked, “I know a good Chinese restaurant just down the street.” Oscar hands a small rag to Charlie, which he quickly uses to wipe most of the blood off of his knuckles.

Charlie wanted nothing more than to turn the other direction and search down every alleyway in the city until he found Max again. His mind and body were engaged in a battle, it was Charlie against himself. In the end, his stomach pain and hunger won out. He gave Oscar a minuscule nod and determined that the search for the person behind his life’s misery would have to wait twenty minutes.

~

The Chinese restaurant was about a block away and the pair began to smell the amazing scent wafting out of the hole-in-the-wall establishment as they stood just across the street from it. The streets were mildly busy as it was midday but they didn't have to wait long before a break in traffic allowed them to enter and pick a small table. A waiter brought them each a glass of water and menu, stating that he would be back to get their orders in a few minutes. Despite the fact that Oscar didn't have a bike with them and they were indoors, his bike helmet remained.

Minutes passed silently as the pair looked over their menus. Once their orders had been placed, the questions started. Oscar seemed to want to know everything he could about the young boy, curious about the individual he had been fighting with, how he ended up in the city, where he was from. Charlie was tight-lipped, his responses either curt or non-existent.

When Oscar realized that he would not be able to get any more information out of the boy, he began to talk about himself. The therapy group he ran, the teenagers he worked with. Charlie all but blocked out the conversation. He had been in therapy before, both individual and group varieties at the hospital just a few months ago. He was not interested.

Despite his disinterest in this man's passion for therapy, he couldn't help but be intrigued by this man's story and attitude. He talked like he knew what Charlie had been through, what he was still going through. Normally this kind of talk infuriated Charlie, it had been full of pretentious doctors talking down to him, acting like they knew best. Oscar wasn't like that. Instead, he simply talked. No suggestions for this med or that, no

instructions on how to ‘get better.’ No judgment or condescension. It was solely why Charlie had accepted when Oscar offered him the spare room in his flat. It was better than still living outside or fighting for a space in the homeless shelters when the snow hit, at least that was Oscar’s argument. The chill that was creeping into the air more and more each day as fall turned to winter made it impossible for Charlie to turn down the offer.

Chapter 13

The day that Charlie moved into Oscar's flat was glorious. A full warm meal, even if it was only a take-away pizza, was better than having to scavenge in dumpsters for it. Charlie had thought his night couldn't get any better when the pizza hit his tongue, but that had been beaten when he got to lie in a real bed for the first time in months, falling asleep almost instantly in a room of his own where he didn't need to worry that someone would steal all of his belongings while he slept.

The following weeks in Oscar's flat led to them becoming tentative friends. It began with Oscar doing most of the talking. Slowly, Charlie realized Oscar hadn't been lying when he told Charlie that he could understand what he was going through more than most. Charlie opened up bit by bit, the two began talking about their experiences and lives without ever giving a name to the gloomy state that threatened to overwhelm them at times. Charlie even asked Oscar about the bike helmet. He had never seen the man without it but he didn't seem to own a bike.

"This ol' thing?" Oscar asked, a smile on his face. "It protects me."

Charlie didn't bother to ask about it again. He didn't know what the man meant, but the man was the first to show genuine concern and care for him since he had left home. Oscar was the first person in a while that Charlie felt he could trust, that he didn't think was working against him, and he didn't want to mess that up. If that man felt the need to wear a bike helmet for whatever reason, then so be it.

It was months before Oscar had finally convinced Charlie to attend his group. His first time, Charlie didn't speak a word, hesitant to let any of these people in. The room

was filled with teenagers, some as young as thirteen or fourteen, but most around sixteen or seventeen. There were even a few eighteen-year-olds who couldn't bring themselves to leave the group. Despite Charlie's reluctance to contribute, he could tell that this group was its own family. They helped each other and shared things he couldn't yet imagine telling anyone, much less a group. They managed to make Charlie feel welcomed without overwhelming him or expecting anything.

Despite Charlie's reluctance to share anything with the group, he kept showing up. Twice a week he would meet the group of teens in an unused room in the church's basement and listen to them. Eventually, he began to talk, slowly at first. It started as just talking to Phillip, one of the eighteen-year-olds, before or after the group and quickly grew as Phillip included him in conversations with Melanie and Theo, twins who couldn't have been more than fifteen but had seen more than their share of life troubles, as had every person in the group.

It was exactly a week later when Charlie finally spoke up in the group session. He spoke of Max and his role in the life that Charlie had lived. How listening to others speak had helped him realize Max was a creation of his own mind, an entity that controlled his thoughts and actions from within. How he blocked out his own thoughts with heavy walls erected in his mind and drove away every person in his life with the thick black veils of indifference and darkness that he didn't let anyone see through. How he wanted to let people in, specifically these people sitting next to him. How he needed people to confirm what was real. No one moved a muscle as Charlie told his story, no one seemed shocked or pitied him. They each had their own issues of the past and their own troubles to face in

the future, but sitting there in that room they could support each other, could work to heal themselves while also knowing that they were helping others heal.

That day, Oscar couldn't remove the smile from his face. The boy he had run into close to a year ago was finally beginning to heal, to realize that he can create a life, a life he wants to live.

The session ended and the heavy talk ceased, but no one wanted to part ways yet. The group took a walk through a nearby park in the crisp late fall air as the sun shone down. Oscar had stayed behind to clean and close up the church room as usual.

The small group walked through the park quietly, stopping once they reached two benches resting in the shade. Charlie had to confirm with his friends that the squirrel with green eyes wasn't real. That the animal was not chittering away while scurrying around his feet. Recently, Charlie had learned a lot about what was and wasn't real, but it was still something he struggled with.

"Charlie?" a voice asked, interrupting his thoughts.

"Ya?" Charlie replied to Melanie.

"I want to ask you something. Is that okay?" She asked with mild hesitation. She continued, urged on by a slight nod from Charlie.

"What does 'blubephe' mean?"

Charlie's expression showed confusion.

"I heard you mention it a few times before but I'm not sure what you mean by it."

"Ummm, it just means 'blubephe'."

Silence followed, no one sure what to say next.

“I guess,” Charlie started. “It kind of means ‘no’.”

“Oh,” Melanie replied, “Theo, ask me a question,” she turned to her brother.

“Ummm okay, do you like mustard?” he asked after a moment of thought.

“Blubephe!” Melanie replied, humor in her voice. “This is great!”

The others around them started trying out the new word for themselves. A small smile broke through the barrier and lent itself to a rare expression for him, grateful that his new friends accepted the word, that they accepted him.

~

Charlie knew what he needed to do, he hadn't been home since he ran away, hadn't contacted anyone to tell them that he was okay.

While that needed to happen, it felt overwhelming to think of seeing everyone again, to see the faces of those he had left behind, it felt like something he couldn't do yet. Instead, he wrote a letter.

‘Mom and Dad,’ it started. ‘I’m okay. And I’m sorry for running away. I am sorry for all of the worry I must have caused you and I’m sorry that it has taken me this long to contact you. I promise I will come home soon, but there are a few more things I need to do here first. Things I need to do to heal. I will see you before Christmas.

Love, your son Charles Jr.’

Charlie placed the letter gingerly in an envelope and sealed it before he could back out. He addressed it to his childhood home and placed it on the desk before falling into the most restful sleep he had in years.

The entire group showed up as moral support the next day as he placed the envelope in a blue mail drop box. As the letter slid from his fingers, all the tense anxiety he had about sending the letter left his body. He knew it wasn't enough to make up for what he had done, for how he had left and how long it had been. But it was a start, he would be home to explain and make amends in person soon enough. There was one more thing to do.

He walked into the small café with Phillip, Theo, and Melanie. Charlie walked straight to a small table surrounded by four chairs in the corner after telling Phillip his order. The three of them walked up to the counter to order their drinks as Charlie opened the computer Oscar had lent him and opened a blank Word document. *All I need to do is start*, he thought to himself, *that is the hardest part*. With that thought in mind, he typed three words 'To Live With'.

ARTIST STATEMENT

1. Introduction

To Live With is the story of Charlie, a boy who develops schizophrenia. The story covers ages nine to seventeen, displaying important life moments to highlight the development of the disease through Charlie's experiences. Schizophrenia is a condition of the mind, which can produce many different presentations and symptoms, ranging from hallucinations and altered emotional experiences to abnormal language expression. The story is told through a tightly filtered third-person perspective that is mainly limited to events Charlie experiences, allowing readers to experience the events with him without defining how one should feel while reading. In this artist statement, I will briefly cover information on major traits and theories of schizophrenia, the state of mental illness in American society, and advocate for literature that represents schizophrenia without bias.

2. Schizophrenia Summary

In writing the story, I wanted to capture the view of an individual living with schizophrenia. It is important to note that schizophrenia is a condition that can present itself in many different ways and stages in life. The presentation of schizophrenia that is presented in this thesis is only one case, much more research is needed for the scientific community to better establish a complete understanding of schizophrenia, its causes, and its effects. Currently, it is thought that schizophrenia is caused by an interaction between genes and a range of environmental factors (World Health Organization "Schizophrenia").

Schizophrenia is a condition that manifests within the mind, causing a myriad of symptoms, many of which are not well understood. Diagnosis of schizophrenia includes many criteria. To summarize: the individual must present with a combination of delusions, hallucinations, disorganized speech and/or behavior, and negative symptoms such as diminished expressions or reactions (American Psychiatric Association 99). In addition, these symptoms must last at least six months and affect one or more major areas of functioning in an individual's life, such as work, relationships, or self-care (American Psychiatric Association 99). Lastly, it is important to rule out other causes for the presenting symptoms, including but not limited to other psychiatric disorders or substance use (Morgan and Townsend 443).

Several symptoms of schizophrenia appear throughout the story. Two of the most important symptom definitions for the understanding of the condition are those of delusions and hallucinations, as the words are often used together and may be easily confused. Delusions are irrational "fixed, false beliefs" the individual believes "true despite evidence to the contrary" (Morgan and Townsend 452). An example of this is when Charlie believes his family may be trying to poison him via his birthday cake, but no one seems to be getting sick as they eat (17). Hallucinations, on the other hand, are "false sensory perceptions not associated with real external stimuli" (Morgan and Townsend 453). For example, Max is someone that Charlie considers a friend, but Charlie does not realize that he is a hallucination. Max is both a visual and auditory hallucination in many cases as Charlie can both see and hear Max but there are no external stimuli causing him to hear and see things.

Schizophrenia contains both exacerbations and remissions. Exacerbations are periods of severe symptoms and conditions. These exacerbations are then followed by periods of minimal symptoms while the condition remains, a remission. Due to the cyclic nature of exacerbations and remissions, there are four defined phases. First is the premorbid phase where vague signs occur before a definitive diagnosis can be made, such as being shy or withdrawn, having poor peer relationships, performing poorly in school, and having an introverted personality (Morgan and Townsend 443). Second is the prodromal phase, in which symptoms begin to manifest in more clinically obvious signs of schizophrenia, such as clear evidence of hallucinations or delusions combined with significant deterioration in function often shown as social withdrawal or depression (Morgan and Townsend 443). This phase tends to last between two and five years on average (Morgan and Townsend 443). The third phase is the active psychotic phase, where symptoms are most severe. Finally, the fourth phase is the residual phase, symptoms are minimal and allow the individual to live a fairly normal life in the time before the next active phase. The majority of this story takes place in the premorbid and prodromal phases of Charlie's experience with schizophrenia where his symptoms develop from vague and undefining to more clinically significant and troublesome.

3. Schizophrenia and Other Mental Illnesses in Society

As it is becoming more acceptable to talk about mental illness, people are more willing to share their experiences and diagnoses. We all know someone with depression or anxiety, but we also likely know someone who is suffering with a mental illness that remains taboo, despite the slow changes in society, such as bipolar disorders, schizophrenia, obsessive-compulsive disorders, addiction or substance abuse disorders, or

post-traumatic stress disorder. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, more than 50% of individuals in the United States will be diagnosed with a mental illness or disorder in their lifetime (CDC “About Mental Health”). Individuals may be afraid of being labeled “crazy” or treated differently, even by those closest to them. For some, this may mean they are unable or unwilling to seek professional diagnosis or treatment. For those brave enough to seek professional diagnosis and treatment, these fears may lead them to hide themselves from others in fear of being reduced to something less than a whole person. In addition, all disorders, physical or psychological, occur in varying severities, leading to misdiagnoses or even no diagnosis in the presence of a condition.

Due to the large amount of societal stigma which covers the topic of mental illness, I wanted to challenge myself to create a story using a condition that many people fear, schizophrenia. According to the World Health Organization, stigma against individuals with schizophrenia is intense and widespread, contributing to both social consequences such as isolation, and discrimination limiting access to necessities such as health care, education, housing, and employment (World Health Organization “Schizophrenia”). Societal stigma is present in all mental illnesses and often stems from a lack of understanding. The brain is one organ that we have had very little information about until recent history and we still know relatively little about what it is capable of. As neuroscience evolves and improves, I am sure that we will continue to learn more about schizophrenia and other conditions that affect the mind in complex ways. In the meantime, it is important to not sit idle but to change the view of mental illness, both for

an improved life experience for those with mental conditions and to remove societal barriers to research due to stigma.

4. Why Schizophrenia

Beyond challenging myself, I chose schizophrenia specifically for this project for a few reasons. Firstly, I want to connect my nursing education and my passion for fiction writing. Secondly, I want to create a character and story about a highly stigmatized condition that readers can still connect with. Lastly, I chose it because of the uniqueness and chronicity of the condition even in the presence of adequate treatment.

Schizophrenia is not a condition that one “grows out of” or one that can be easily controlled using medications or therapy. Rather, treatment is often a combination of trying multiple medications and therapies to best manage the condition, a balancing act between reducing the individual’s symptoms to improve their quality of life while preventing troubling side effects or complicated routines that may hinder an individual’s compliance with the regimen. Options for effective care may include “medication, psychoeducation, family interventions, cognitive-behavioral therapy, and psychosocial rehabilitation” (World Health Organization “Schizophrenia”). Additionally, even with appropriate treatment regimens, many individuals still live with the associated symptoms and will need continued lifelong treatment (Mayo Clinic “Schizophrenia”).

Creating a unique experience for each reader is very important to me. No one experiences mental illness in the same way, much like no one experiences life in the same way. Two individuals can have the same symptoms occur at the same time in their lives, but their outlook and mindset can create entirely different perceptions, both of their lives

and of the illness or condition itself. This is possibly even more true with mental than physical conditions.

5. Creative Decision Analysis

There are many instances in which the story may lack detail, such as locations or outside opinions on the events. Being vague with these details is something I knew I wanted to do, as I recognized it would help others connect to the story. Leslie Lindsey, author of “Always with a Book” interview series, speaks in her interview with Laird Hunt about how readers connect with a story. Lindsey states that there must be a partnership between the author and the reader, creating “a story that brews in the white space” (Lindsey). The author creates the story and leaves ‘white space’ the reader can fill in to aid in their connection to the story. By remaining vague, I create ‘white space’, allowing each reader to imagine these pieces of the story in a way that resonates with them. Using the story’s locations, for example, some may imagine that the story takes place somewhere in the USA, while others may picture it in Australia or Russia. Vagueness creates the ability for individual readers to create their own slightly different versions and opinions of the story that are most impactful for them.

I chose to write from the third person, primarily filtered through Charlie’s perspective, save for a few rare glimpses into the interactions or thoughts of others. This shows Charlie’s journey while still allowing readers to form their own opinions of the story and the picture of mental illness that it exhibits through the use of ‘white space’ mentioned earlier. It was a difficult decision to make, as there were times that it would have been easier to carry the story along and show Charlie’s symptoms from a different perspective at times, such as showing the change in Charlie’s behavior from his mother’s

or father's point of view. In the end, I wanted each reader to be able to imagine their own version of what Charlie's family may or may not have been thinking at times.

Many families with individuals living with any kind of mental illness may wonder how or why they had not been able to recognize that their loved one was dealing with an illness. This is a difficult question to answer as it varies greatly in every situation. In the case of Charlie, I imagine that his family had seen the gradual changes and withdrawal but were hesitant to comment in fear of pushing him away further, causing them to make excuses for his behavior. Rather than explain this, I allow each reader to make their own assumptions and their own visions of the experience, creating a story that carries a unique meaning and purpose for each reader.

The story begins with nine-year-old Charlie playing with his best friend Sarah and interacting with his family. Then, Max is introduced. Max is a good friend of Charlie's at this point, but he has some odd characteristics. Firstly, Max is most often seen when others are not around. He doesn't show up until Charlie is walking alone to the apple orchard, and he doesn't seem to approach from any direction, rather appearing suddenly. This is the first hint of Charlie's condition, hallucinations. To add to this, Charlie is in the premorbid phase. He is still young and his interactions with Max are mild enough that his family believes Charlie will grow out of his interactions with Max, a harmless imaginary friend.

The next chapter of the story follows Charlie as he grows into adolescence and his symptoms continue to grow in severity with age. At his fourteenth birthday party, he struggles to enjoy himself, displaying a lack of connection to individuals around him, emotions, and events in general. A large portion of this chapter is dedicated to diving

further into Sarah's backstory, serving two purposes. First and most obviously, it develops Sarah's character further and allows readers to create a better connection to her character. Secondly, it serves to show that Charlie struggles to stay present in the moment. This inability is enhanced by sections about the family cat, Stormy, and the family horse, Stanley. Altered attention, along with deficits in reasoning and other domains of cognitive dysfunction are present in an estimated 98% of individuals with schizophrenia (Morgan and Townsend 452). Max appears and interrupts the celebration, initiating Charlie's suspicion that someone may be trying to poison him through his birthday cake. Even though no one has gotten sick after eating the cake, he still refuses to eat it in case it has been poisoned for only him, this is a delusion.

The following chapter becomes a build-up for the first catastrophe to take place in Charlie's life, the barn fire. We see his inattention and suspicion grow as he becomes further withdrawn from those around him. We see the very pronounced changes in his personality and interactions from the first two chapters. A glimpse into Claire's perspective shows that she does see the very gradual changes in her son's behavior but is likely at a loss for what to do.

Charlie's life begins to tumble out of control when the barn burns down. We begin to see Charlie struggle with movement in some instances of severe stress. This lack of movement is a form of catatonia, another possible symptom of schizophrenia (Morgan and Townsend 450). We see Charlie grow more suspicious of those around him and get very angry with Max, believing that he is responsible. We see more of Max's influence on Charlie and how he had begun hiding Max's presence from those closest to him.

Once Sarah dies, Charlie feels that all his happiness has left with her. He even begins to believe that his mother is not his mother and that she is a liar, the accusation allowing him to deny that Sarah is dead. Charlie is so distraught that he refuses to attend Sarah's funeral and is instead confronted by Max, starting a fight between the two boys. Here, Charlie is grieving and struggling through the first two of five stages, denial and anger, and even some depression, as grief does not occur in strict stages or orders (Cuellar 58). The fight results in Charlie being admitted to the hospital due to many cuts and blood loss. Charlie is sedated for his own safety and the safety of the hospital staff.

While staying in the hospital, one of the sedation medications runs out and no one notices, causing him to wake up slightly and alert the staff. While fighting the staff, Charlie begins using the word 'Blubephe' (51). This is known as a neologism, where the word has no meaning to others but has meaning to the individual (Morgan and Townsend 453). Charlie also begins to speak in sentences and concepts that do not seem connected, but he does not realize they are not connected, such as "If they take me I won't swim back, I can't swim! The tsunami will take it!" (51). This is known as loose association (Morgan and Townsend 453). While loose association can be a symptom of schizophrenia, the statement could also be the result of Charlie's confusion, as he is still on a low dose of the second sedating medication. I chose to leave it up to the reader to determine if they think the statements are due to schizophrenia or due to the condition of Charlie's mind while still on sedatives.

Following Charlie's hospital stay, he is started on several new medications to help control the symptoms of schizophrenia and allow him to live a more normal life. These medications do reduce his symptoms, but they also leave him feeling 'numb and slow'

(56). Charlie begins to feel suffocated and empty at home, so he stops taking his medication and decides to run away, ending up homeless in a big city.

While in the city, Charlie continues to struggle with Max's appearances until one day he spots Max and begins to fight with him, only to get interrupted by someone knocking them over. Charlie encounters a man named Oscar, who recognizes something about Charlie. Oscar is a man who also struggles with a mental condition. I did not explicitly state Oscar's mental condition, but it will likely be assumed by readers that he lives with schizophrenia as well, due to his supposed understanding of Charlie and his insistence that a bike helmet will keep him safe from an unknown danger (63). Oscar offers Charlie a room to stay in at his flat, being that winter and cold nights are fast approaching. Oscar runs a small therapy/support group for adolescents who are struggling, and after a bit of struggle, he convinces Charlie to join. Charlie is hesitant but slowly warms up to the idea and attends, eventually making friends and feeling like he is a part of something again, no longer alone in the world.

With the support and acceptance of his friends, Charlie finally writes home for the first time in almost a year and acknowledges that there is something else he needs to do to help him heal. The final scene shows Charlie beginning to write a book. The book is titled *To Live With*. Here it is revealed that Charlie is the author of his own story. Through writing his story, Charlie is meant to gain a sense of closure for the difficult events of his past and a better outlook to face his life ahead, acknowledging that it will not be easy and that schizophrenia is something that he will continue to live with, but that he can choose how to live his life and how to approach the condition.

Similarly to how I chose not to focus on viewpoints from other characters, I made the decision to omit diagnoses of the other characters in the therapy group. There are many conditions that adolescents or individuals of any age may live with, be them physical or psychological. By not giving any of the other individuals a diagnosis or speaking in depth about their stories or experiences, I want to accomplish a few different things. Firstly, I want to give the readers freedom to imagine the individuals' reasons for seeking the support and therapy of the group. If the reader has a connection to a specific condition, I want to allow them to connect this story and journey to fit their viewpoints while also expanding their view to see that anyone can help others, regardless of the similarities or differences between individuals. Secondly, I didn't want to rush through their stories and risk minimizing or labeling characters that I had not had a chance to build up adequately. I wanted to avoid the possibility of readers reading a short version of the character's story and associating the diagnosis with the story in a way that wasn't beneficial to the story or to society. Thirdly, I did not want any of the other characters' stories to draw from Charlie's, especially in such a short novella. For some readers, one character's story may resonate with them more than another's. While it is important to consider what may or may not resonate with readers, I did not want one story to overwhelm Charlie's and make the reader wish the story was about a different character, rather than seeing the work for what it is, a story of an individual's life with a condition that does not define them, no matter the severity, complexity, or outside connections.

Anastasia Wickham writes of the rising "willingness by many of [Young Adult Fiction]'s writers to create characters who challenge our perceptions" (10). Specifically, she speaks of two novels, *Challenger Deep* and *Freaks Like Us*, where the author

“confronts the stigma of mental illness and illustrates a road to interdependence, inclusion, agency, and empowerment” (Wickham 10). This sentence had a large impact on how I felt I needed to craft the resolution of the story. I had known previously that I would give Charlie an ending that showed his story was not over, that despite the challenges life had thrown at him and likely will continue to throw at him, he would find ways to enjoy life despite, or rather with, his condition. The friends he makes within the therapy group manage to slowly show him they are there to support one another, rather than to tear each other down. The group serves to show that one does not need to be struggling with the same things to be able to recognize struggle and help others through it, using that support system to help overcome their own struggles.

I would like to acknowledge that I am aware the story does not have an ending that would be typical for a standalone story, something that readers may be confused or frustrated by. I had contemplated many endings for the story but I really wanted to ensure that it was impactful and that it wouldn't be interpreted as the end of Charlie's story. By not giving Charlie a concrete happy ending, I have left it open to interpretation, much like many other details of the story. The end of the story is in no way an ending to Charlie's experience or growth through his journey.

6. Conclusion

Schizophrenia is a condition that, among other things, allows the mind to create situations which do not exist to the outside world. This is something that Charlie experiences repetitively throughout the story and causes a very unique experience, both for him as a character and for the reader. Mental illness is not yet widely accepted by society, creating a culture that makes it difficult to admit to or seek treatment for a mental

condition. This must change, as it will allow for both better treatment for those living with conditions, and for better research into the conditions themselves. I made many of the decisions while writing with one goal in mind: to create a story that readers can connect with to broaden their views on mental illness and those who live with it. Mental illness is not something that overtakes one's life, but something that one must learn to live with and develop their own coping mechanisms for survival and well-being. Writing *To Live With* was an adventure, one I wouldn't trade for anything. I hope you enjoyed reading the story and were able to take something meaningful from this exploration into my choices as a writer.

Thank you for reading!

Sincerely, Serina Lund

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