

Erin Albus

*Alone*

I like being alone.

Most of my childhood was spent alone. Mom was at work. Dad was with his new wife. I was at home, watching TV quietly, waiting for Mom to come home and start dinner.

It was peaceful. Quiet.

Mom said I was an ‘introvert.’ Dad didn’t talk to me all that much, which was fine. I wasn’t all that good at talking to people. Except for Mom. She was the one person that I could talk to freely. She didn’t always get what I talked about—she wasn’t interested in the TV shows I watched or the games I played. That was ok. She liked middle-aged woman stuff like weird almost-porn novels with Fabio on the cover and Lifetime movies. She tried her best to understand me, and I tried my best to understand her. We reached a middle ground of sorts, a land of topics that leave us both somewhat satisfied.

I used to talk to my grandma all the time. She understood everything because she watched all the shows with me. When she died, it was hard. She wasn’t there to watch me after school or take me to the bus. But that was ok, I told Mom when she didn’t know how she would take care of me and pay the bills at the same time. I don’t mind spending some more time alone.

She had enough to worry about.

I like being alone.

Like during lunch. I sit by myself most of the time. I listen to people around me—imagining them as characters in a story, and me as their God, pulling their strings along paths that move around me like a stream.

“Is anyone sitting here?”

I don't look up to see who drew the short straw. I shake my head and continue to pick at my sandwich. The roast beef is bad; it was last week too. I have to ask Mom to get it from somewhere else, though I feel bad about causing a hassle. She always says it's not a big deal to go somewhere else, but I know she wasn't fond of running around after work. She was tired and just wanted to change into sweats and relax before the morning came, and it started all again.

“Cool,” the voice says.

I hear rustling as they sit down before their conversation comes back, and they go on ignoring me. That's fine. The videos on my phone keep me company enough.

Unable to help myself, I peek to see who sat near me. It's a girl in my lit class. She's nice enough. We were partners on a project about *Frankenstein*—I did most of the work. I asked her to go to the library during study hall to work on it and she never showed up. She later said that she forgot. I didn't tell her that I felt stupid sitting alone in the library, staring at the door for thirty minutes like a hopeful puppy. She wasn't the first to forget about me. She probably wouldn't be the last.

Her friends sit around her, all giggling and chatting about homework and life. When we make eye contact, I look down quickly and try to ignore the way my face heats up. My hair isn't even long enough to cover it like in the movies and stories. There, the protagonist can just hide behind a curtain of hair, the world disappearing—only to reappear when she's ready for it. I have to face it.

I swallow down another bite of bad roast beef.

The video is over; another one, a song this time, is already queuing up to play.

*It's Raining Somewhere Else.*

I liked being alone.

Despite this, Mom says it wasn't good for me and wants me to see a psychiatrist. Who am I to refuse? I don't want to upset her. She has enough on her plate as it is—the last thing I want to do is make things worse for her.

Her name is Tara Young. She wants me to call her Tara. *She* called me by the wrong name for two whole appointments; I didn't correct her. Didn't know how.

She likes to ask me about my father. I just shrug and say, "It is what it is."

"How often do you see him?"

"Once a week."

"Do you wish you saw him more?"

"Not really."

I don't tell her I wish I saw him less, or that we don't really talk when I am over there. We mostly just sit there, all the words never said filling the air between us. I'm the only one who chokes on it—he doesn't even notice. I could've told her that sometimes I genuinely hate him and that I wish that he would fill the silence so that I wasn't the only one who fucking tried. But I didn't. I sit there and shrug slightly, unsure of how to proceed.

"How are your friends?"

"I don't really have any."

"Ok, and why is that?"

"I'm not good at talking to people."

Her face crinkled slightly, and I knew she didn't like what I said.

She was easy to lie to, to sell false stories of getting better. She didn't need to know that I ached deep in my chest when I thought about the long weekends of silence as Mom worked away and I sat alone in the house, letting the voices of videos fill the air. She didn't need to know that I wanted to make friends, but I couldn't. Not when they leave you. Everyone says they'll be there forever, but forever doesn't exist. It's a mirage in a desert, luring fools to die for it.

People leave.

People die.

Silence is the only thing that will live forever, even after all the stars and planets have faded into obscurity.

But Tara continues, never noticing my disinterest.

"What have I said about those negative terms? How can you phrase it so you're not blaming yourself?"

"My communication skills are not where I would like them to be?"

"Better. And how can you improve this?"

"Uh... Talk to people?"

"That's one way."

I hate when she answers like that. Makes me come up with my own solutions. I'm here because I couldn't fix myself, and yet I have to pick up the pieces anyway and fill in the blanks she leaves like breadcrumbs to salvation. It feels like I'm doing most of the work, honestly. But it isn't like anyone listens to me anyway. If they did, they'd stop trying to fit my misery into their predetermined holes, a square shoved so far into the circle that it can never be removed.

A permanent mistake.

The only one who listens is Mom, but she hears the wrong things. She hears what I don't say, what's left hidden between the cracks. Not the truth, but an approximation. Close enough that she's worried, and that's the reason I do this. The reason I sit here. So she doesn't worry because all I want is for her to be happy and she's happiest when I'm happy.

It sucks, having someone's happiness dependent on you. Every decision is suddenly not only about you, but about them and how you affect them. It sucks even more when the person who's so dependent is really the only person you have left to cling to in the tumultuous ocean of life. I'm her life raft, constantly sinking, bailing out the water with a pit filled bucket.

But she can never know we're sinking because panic only makes the raft sink faster and faster until we drown in the murky water. Forgotten. Lost.

Alone.

I've grown accustomed to being alone. That's the truth of the matter. Like climbers growing used to thin air, I've grown used to the silence and loneliness. I no longer notice it. But that's not what I say because that's admitting there's a problem. So instead, I say:

I like being alone.

That's what I say when Mom sits me down and tells me she's worried for the fifth time that month. She sighs and looks more tired and haggard than I have ever seen her, and for a second, my heart breaks and reforms, red hot and burning a hole in my chest. Why is she so sad? I've done everything right. I'm *happy*, I want to scream, but the words die on my tongue.

“Mommy?”

My voice cracks halfway through and suddenly there are tears. What’s the point of convincing the world I’m ok when the person I’m doing it for can see right through every lie and smokescreen I surround myself with. What’s the point of pretending I’m fine when it isn’t even making her happy. I can’t keep up with the rising water anymore and her head has plunged into the icy water, a shock to the system, a wake up call. I know, in this moment, that she sees through me, that she can see the ocean we’re in and the water clawing to get in our lungs. I can see it in her eyes, in the lost, ‘where-did-I-go-wrong’ type look.

“Yes, sweetheart?”

She looks at me like she doesn’t know what to say, like she’s hoping I’ll finally go to her for help. I miss her wrapping her arms around me after a nightmare and telling me everything’s alright. I miss being able to cry and scream and wish for better while she promises she’ll try to make everything alright. I miss laughing with her on her bed late at night, just talking about nothing and somehow everything that really mattered.

I miss *her*.

“I don’t want to be alone.”