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One day when my back was against my parent's door, Niagara fell down my cheeks as I heard my parents abuse each other. As violent words were exchanged, the blood inside each of them seethed. I opened the door and I saw my father's hands around my mother's neck, her eyes shaped like daggers, she had no fear. When you are in a household where the environment around you physically and emotionally suffocates you, it is important to build a thick skin. My father, mother, and brother not only built snake scales but titanium walls to keep the people out who refused to grow cold like them.

Creating a false mask in order to please the crowd became a ritual for me as I believed that the perception of an ice cold queen created strength. I communicated to others that I did not need a human's touch or affection. Rather, a herculean boulder that camouflages into the night where I can operate solely on the red and blue synthetic fibers that are weaved throughout the hundred dollar bills. The mask conveyed such false pretenses, when my true cravings lied in unlimited hugs and kisses and two knees to submerge my face when I cried. Twenty-nineteen tore down that mask, and ripped out my vulnerability like a broken-hearted girl cuts stems off of roses. I was left on the floor, petals everywhere, begging for a savior.

The beginning of it all was when I met Daniel Williams in the spring of my freshman year. He was nineteen like me, and carried the same broken abandoned look in his eyes that I lugged around in my shoulders. I used to believe that I was drawn to him because he had an allusive mysterious darkness, but to be sincere I knew there was no darkness, only a lost boy whose brain remains in neverland. I am diagnosed with bipolar disorder II, and at the time I was trying different medications in order to find one to assist me in becoming stable. Freshman year I had

been falling into episode holes every couple months. Spring semester I was falling into the largest depression pit, and I needed another soul's affection to deliver the love inside of me that was lacking.

I first hung out with him at a party he brought me too at a town near campus. He grew excited for me to enter his environment and meet his friends and acquaintances. I had never been in a relationship before, but always admired others courting rituals from afar. I wondered if this was the initiation process, was I being tested? What happens if I pass?

I walked into a cream and black two-story house, where inebriated college students covering table-tops, chairs, and granite kitchen counters were placeholders for marijuana rolling stations. I told myself this is what college children seem to enjoy, so I allowed Daniel to carry me into the zoo.

He began to introduce me to his mates by exchanging quick names and smiles. The friends seemed to be shaking hands with me, but their eyes deciphered that by the morning I would be forgotten with the rest of the night. After Daniel paraded me around the party like a thanksgiving float, he pulled me in close to him, and exclaimed,

“Everyone keeps coming up to me and saying, ‘Good job Daniel.’ I might have to keep you with me for good.”

I wondered for a split second what his friends could be congratulating him for, until I realized he was being commended on acquiring such an attractive girl. Although my looks are the treasured trait, the boy carrying me is being awarded, not me. I took another half of a second to once again inhale my surroundings. I cognized that Daniel brought me to this party as a trophy, a way to exhibit his mask to others around him. He is communicating that he is

powerful enough to obtain any barbie doll that stands and smiles and makes our “king,” look good.

I nervously smiled as my reply and scurried to the bathroom, isolating myself from him. I entered the guest bathroom and saw, “Don’t Drink and Drive!” sign. Classy. I pumped up my hair with some finger pulls and reapplied my lip gloss. I smiled at myself in the mirror, I believed I knew who I was, and that I was doing what she wanted me to do. I was fitting in, trying to get a boyfriend, looking beautiful. My stomach was sucked in with a subtle gold bodysuit and my butt was accented with black skinny jeans. I smiled at her in the mirror,

“We are making little Serena proud. She thought nobody would love her, or that she would never be popular. Well, look at me now.”

I sucked in my hunger for true love, romance, and adventure for an arrangement. A relationship where we carry out our masks for one another, where neither of us can get hurt, because our hearts were never in the equation anyways.

As I cascaded back into the party I swallowed my end of the Captain Morgan bottle that Daniel bought for me. I was no longer within and without, simultaneously enchanted and repelled by the inexhaustible variety of life, as Fitzgerald would say. I intoxicated myself enough to only be within, enjoying the society that I only a few minutes ago held such disdain for.

A couple hours later I found myself lying in the bed of my soon to be lover. A creation of mistrust and trust was created in my heart vessel. I had an understanding that I must be wary of those who flash their pearly whites and ask for candy in return.

Part 2:

There are times in life when one enters the realization that the emergency exit route is barred shut with boards lined with poison ivy.....

When I lied down on the gynecologist examination table, I found myself staring at the babies' smiles around the office. One had deep rooted dimples like Daniels, the other had button aqua eyes that reminded you of the pacific ocean. I wondered how many of these children will end up in the foster system like Daniel. Or how many will grow up in a broken family like me. I pondered if it is possible for broken children to be complete parents. I meditated on whether it was fair for the child to be brought into a world with such cruelty and injustice. I decided it was not.

My gynecologist walked in, she has studious black glasses that remind me of a younger version of my mom in medical school, studying medicine solely because her family convinced her too. She smiled, she held a warm smile on her face that projected hope and warmth. I could feel the sunshine when I saw her pearly whites. She sat down, and asked me if I had an abortion recently.

"No.. why?" I was confused as to why she had brought up a possible death of a child, one that would have been inside of me.

"Pregnancy tests usually show up positive after an abortion.. Your test was positive. You are pregnant."

There are times in life when one enters the realization that the emergency exit route is barred shut with boards lined with poison ivy.

I began banging the door violently and searching for a way out. I searched every nook and cranny and allowed the vines to rope around me tighter and tighter.

"Serena? Are you okay?"

I was tugged back into reality.

“Yes, yes I am here. What’s the next step in getting an abortion?”

She began stating how I would call Planned Parenthood to schedule an appointment, how much the pregnancy would cost, and that I have to get the abortion in two weeks. I kept nodding along silently, but all I could do was stare at the smiling babies around me. I felt the hands inside of my chest, banging.

How can I ensure another child’s happiness, when I as a child never felt safe and secure? Growing up, I was tyrannized from age three to fourteen years old. I used to sit at a bench during recess in middle school and journal because none of the kids would play with me. The teachers would ask why I am all alone, and I would say that nobody likes me. They would exclaim that I am mistaken, and force me to try to befriend others. I would approach every group repeatedly asking if I can join in on hopscotch or their conversations. In any event I was given a disgusted look with furrowed brows. I would proceed to ask again, and my peers would usually respond insincerely..

“We don’t have any space, sorry.”

Slowly my feet would be dragged back into my spot on the bench, and I would proceed to write in my journal. Eventually, I stopped asking others for company, and grew comfortable staying inside for recess, reading. But deep down, even at nineteen years old, I am still that girl who is too afraid to let anyone in because of the fear of getting hurt. I’d rather be isolated than be rejected again. I do not want to teach my children the same values. I am not ready to have children.

“Thank you Dr. Arya.. I will schedule an appointment when I reach home.”

I reached home and lay down on my twin bed in my dorm room. I covered myself like a burrito in a rose colored heated blanket and reached my hand down to my stomach. I felt the area where the child would be, and felt a sort of comfort. The fear seemed to dissipate and now

all I felt was a longing to keep the child inside of me. I knew that no matter what this child would love me through thick and thin, and I suddenly did not feel alone anymore. I messaged Daniel and told him that I was pregnant, and I needed him to come over. He stopped responding to my messages and shut his phone off for the night. I was completely alone, and spent the rest of the night holding my stomach under my heated blanket. Whoever was in there, was the only one I had.

Part 3:

A Few Weeks Later

I awoke to a massacre of twelve angry men on my sheets. There was blood on my red and black pajama pants, and on my pure white sheets. I am not religious, but at that moment I felt that I had sinned.

I quickly ran to the bathroom and called my gynecologist.

“Hi Dr. Arya... I am bleeding a lot and it got all over my bed and my sheets.. Is this normal?”

“Do you feel any pain? Does anything hurt? Tell me how you feel.”

“I don’t feel any pain anywhere, there is just a lot of blood.”

“You are most likely having a miscarriage. Go to your nearest emergency room.”

I quickly changed out of my clothing that projected my sins like a scarlet letter, and got ready for the emergency room.

As I sat in the emergency room of Salem Hospital, I caressed my stomach. The burden of guilt was hovering over my psyche, as I repeated the same three phrases over and over in my head.

You killed your baby. You shouldn't have sex. This is why you are alone.

I could not understand why I was feeling such dread and guilt for the child dying, I was planning on killing the baby in an abortion appointment soon. However, after seeing the sights of a vampire massacre on my white cotton sheets, I felt like a murderer. I walked into the bathroom to change into the white hospital gown. I could see the purity within the seams, and my fingers burned when they came too close.

You killed someone.

I was no longer pure. I knew staring at the mirror in my gown that I would hide my mistake like a drunken tattoo from the world. A nineteen year old girl is not *supposed* to get pregnant or have a miscarriage. These are things we hide.

As I walked outside of the bathroom I entered a room with an ultrasound monitor and a blonde woman with green glasses asking me to lie down. She began by rubbing a cold clear gel around my stomach. Afterwards, she circled the gel with a machine called a 'probe'. The device is utilized to grasp high-frequency waves made from the ultrasound. She swirled the probe around the oven under my breasts, and searched for the bun.

"Do you feel any pain right now?" the nurse inquired.

Something just died in me, Doctor. I feel pain everywhere. You just cannot see it.

"No, I don't feel any physical pain anywhere. Just a lot of blood." *There was a war inside and I lost.* I responded quietly as I rubbed my stomach again.

The nurse removed the gel and took away the probe device.

"I didn't see anything on the machine. There is nothing there."

My heart sank to my stomach.

"Okay, thank you."

When I reached my dorm room I ripped off my tainted sheets and as I walked to the laundry room, I stopped to stare into my reflection.

You finally had someone who would always love you, and you killed it. Now you will always be alone.

I sucked the hole in my heart that my loneliness created, washed my sheets, and smiled. *Nineteen year old girls don't want to be pregnant. This is a good thing. Be happy.*

I started messaging and trying to meet with Daniel again. For the entirety of my pregnancy and miscarriage he had been secretly frantic, so he distanced himself from me. I knew that what we had was over, the reality of a pregnancy destroyed our facades. The mask began to tear, and our real personalities began to show. I had learned that when things become difficult, Daniel runs because he becomes cowardly and overwhelmed. He had learned that when I undergo a painful situation, I turn incredibly indecisive and allow fear to let me run away and come back various times. Once the mask began to tear we realized neither of us was ready for anything serious, and that we have to reglue our lies *alone* before we can perform again.

Though my sense knew that what I had with Daniel was over before it even started, my hormones craved his attention. After a miscarriage a female undergoes various mental side effects. According to American Pregnancy, women feel numbness, disbelief, anger, guilt, sadness, depression, and difficulty concentrating." I felt guilty, because I still believed that I killed the baby. But most importantly, I felt an extreme amount of depression. Each day I carried the weight of a dark hole filling in my stomach. I didn't eat, sleep, and fell behind in all of my classes. Later in the semester I ended up having to delete two classes from my gpa, because of the pain and strife I went through.

One night Daniel asked me to come over. I did not have the mental energy to even leave the house, but my depressed mind needed a protective arm around it. My cyclone stomach

needed affection to calm it. We laid in bed in silence that night. There was no protection, warmth, or affection, only distance. The room was 69 degrees fahrenheit, but lying next to him the bed felt ice cold. I tried to put my leg in between his, and in deep sleep, he pushed me off. I could feel that what we had was over, yet I could not bring myself to leave. As the morning came he tried to lay his hands on me, and caress me in places that I did not come here to get touched. After the miscarriage and pregnancy I no longer felt sexy, and my depression gifted me with weariness. I pushed his hands away from me. I then proceeded to tell him that for two weeks, I was not allowed to have sex, doctor's orders. I hid behind the remainder of my mask by hiding my lack of interest in having sex with him. As the realization hit him that he was not having sex that morning, he let go of me like spoiled ham at the deli and rolled back over to the other side.

I began working two jobs and did three online classes in the summer. I needed credits and money so I could study abroad in Italy in the spring of twenty-twenty. At the time, I did not know how to pause my life so I could rest and sit with my pain. Whenever I had any severe emotional destruction, I distracted myself to make the pain disappear. I spent the entire summer working, studying, and spending time with Daniel. I did not keep any time for myself, as I was too afraid to face myself in the mirror, and to accept that something died in me. However, the longer Daniel and I knew each other, the faster my mask tore off. We spent all of our time fighting over text messages. I kept pushing him to commit to me so that the last six months with him would have meant something, and he kept trying to push me away each time I got too close. I found myself crying on my way to work when I listen to sad songs or releasing bowling balls worth of tears during my netflix sessions. Each time a tear would fall, I would wipe the residue off with a napkin, plump my lips with gloss, and smile.

I just kept smiling.

One day I tried to initiate sex with Daniel, I believed that if I was spending time with him, the societal requirement is to have sex and enjoy it. *That's what women are supposed to do, right?* Each time I slept over, we slept on opposite sides of the bed. I wanted to melt the iceberg, even though I was not ready to be touched. I finally asked Daniel why were not having sex anymore, and his response ended up being more horrific than my previous ignorance.

“You don't make an effort to be sexy anymore. You aren't good in bed. I deserve more. You aren't what I want.”

I tried to scream, “I am trying to be sexy anymore because something died in me! Why can't you understand! Why can't anyone hear me!”

But all that came out was..

“I will try harder! I promise.. Please. Let's give this another chance.”

He responded with certainty. “If it is meant to happen, it will happen naturally. Don't force it.”

I believed he was right, and started waiting for my relationship to fix itself. I convinced myself that I needed to release control, and that every good thing happens in time. However, each time I looked in the mirror, I told myself that I am ugly. I asked myself, *Why can't you be pretty like the other girls? Why aren't you girly and sexy? Why aren't you, like he said, a 'man's girl?'*”

As time progressed, I began to feel less and less adequate. That ten year old girl who was bullied by her family and peers began to shine through. That poor child was terrorized for simply being her, and I had spent the rest of my life escaping that. I never wanted anyone to steal my confidence in such a way again. I never wanted to hate myself again. However, as a

nineteen year old girl, I found myself hiding from the mirror so I could run from the shame of ending up in the situation again. For allowing a man to determine my value.

Day in and day out my value shrunk, as he began to pick and prod on every part of my personality. I was too spontaneous, independent, strong minded, and manly. I did not try hard enough to be girly, sexy, or respectable. He communicated to me, in August of twenty-nineteen, that he needed a woman to treat him like a king even in the approach of him being wrong. He did not want a woman, he wanted a barbie doll that would sit quietly and praise him when spoken too. I knew that Daniel was breaking me, yet I continued to stay in the relationship in order to avoid facing myself.

What would I say to her? How can I admit to myself that this is all my fault?

I spent the end of the summer in India, and one night Daniel communicated to me a truth that still makes me angry to this day.

“I hate women. They make me sick when they utilize their bodies to get things from guys and walk around like they own the place. I do not respect them.”

“What was your first impression of me then?” I asked, curiouser and curiouser.

“You thought you were the best when you walked around and saw all the guys eyeing you. You knew we all wanted you, and you got off on it. All the guys made a bet on who could have sex with you first, I won.”

A huge lump formed inside of my throat. I could not hide from the truth anymore, it was staring right in front of me. I threw my phone on the ground, and locked myself in the bathroom. I stared at myself in the mirror, and told myself that I am sorry.

“We are trapped. I don’t know how to fix this.”

I peeled down to the floor and sat criss-cross applesauce. My legs felt the crimson fur rug under me, I put my palms on it for comfort. I began to cry, and this time I could not stop. I

have never truly believed in a god, solely a universal energy. However, that night I put my hands together in a prayer position, and I prayed.

“Please..” I found it hard to breathe, as I was crying so hard, but I pushed through to finish my prayer. “I need help, I can’t do this anymore, I need a way out.”

I did not know it at the time, but I believe I was praying to myself. Because the next day, I found the courage to block Daniel on everything. I never looked back.

When I returned from India, the crying seemed to get louder and far more intensified. I asked my therapist during an appointment soon after, why I cannot stop crying.

“You have spent the entire year numbing yourself to the pains you have faced. First the pregnancy, then losing the child, and then a very painful breakup. You are now starting to feel *everything*. You need to let yourself cry it all out.” She informed me.

“When will it stop?” I asked, scared of crying forever.

“When you are ready.” my therapist comforted me with that remark, she reminded me that one day the pain will stop, and that I will escape this tunnel of darkness.

As I began to feel all the pain of these past nine months, I realized that it is better to feel every ounce of my heart breaking, then the empty numbness that I had been carrying. I began to work on the art of stillness. I practiced yoga every morning, buried myself into school, and drank tea. I forced myself to be alone constantly, and began to say no to others around me and put myself first. I realized in those last few months of twenty-nineteen, that there is an art to suffering. Humans will stay in horrible situations in order to remain in control. The possibility of being happy is far too scary, because that lies in the unknown. I remained in the fear of being alone throughout my life, because I did not know what would happen if I tried. The unknown was far scarier than the thought of being alone. However, I realized that being truly alone is less

painful than being surrounded by leeches who suck the happiness from me like the miscarriage did my blood. Currently, when I am feeling trapped in a dark situation, I think of Daniel. I realize he is a statuette of an escape I will always want to run back too. However, I have realized that it is far more fulfilling to have hope and fight for a future light, then to cower in the darkness.