

“Untitled”

Eli had a big scar on his arm from the time he punched a hole in a window. Though maybe that was a myth. One day in the spring of ninth grade, he used that arm to wave to me in the English wing and said “hey” – but there was no way he was talking to me. Later that day, he caught up to me and asked me why I had ignored him in the hallway, and I wondered if I could get away with claiming I hadn’t seen him.

I was terrified of Eli. I’d heard tons of rumors about him. My older sister’s friend Gray had dated him in middle school and they’d had a famously bad breakup which no one could decipher the truth behind, since they both had such contradicting stories. Gray knew that Eli was around the outskirts of some kids in the grade above me I had begun hanging out with – not really, even. He was a friend of Jake and Mandy, who I’d only recently become acquainted with through my friend Mimi. But I guess that was close enough for Gray to worry about it.

Sparing any details, he’d say things like “stay away from Eli,” or “Eli’s bad news,” and the perpetually angry look on Eli’s face was evidence enough to listen. So when he waved ‘hello’ to me that day in the English wing, I panicked.

He must’ve seen me around, hanging out with his friends – I couldn’t think of any other reason he’d suddenly want to talk to me. That quick “hello” wasn’t the end of it. If he caught me alone in the student lounge, he’d sit right next to me and just start talking. I’d listen with bated breath. The first time he did it, he told me about the time he punched a window. He rolled up his sleeves and showed me a huge scar that stretched across his forearm. I wasn’t sure how to respond, but I guess that mystery was solved.

A few days later, he told me his side of the breakup with Gray, and I wasn't sure if I believed him. Eli's voice was gravelly and monotonous – his face was, too. His steel expression didn't help his case and he could see me tapping my feet and picking at my fingernails as he spoke.

"Are you afraid of me?" He asked me one day, sitting down beside me on the couch in the student lounge. Our legs were touching.

I told him that I wasn't, but he insisted "it seems like you are," and I was suddenly aware of my frigid posture. I leaned back a little.

He asked if I knew his girlfriend, and I said that I didn't. I did. Not only did I know her, I knew she'd be bothered by the fact that her boyfriend was hanging out with another girl. Kate was pretty jealous. She was another friend of Mimi's, though I didn't hang out with her like I did Jake and Mandy and the others. She had big, round doll eyes which she lined with a thick wing that went out to her temples. She wore cut up band tees, fishnet tights and platform boots – a more daring version of my own style.

"I think you'd like her," Eli said. I did.

I was curious about what he was leading up to here, but I wanted to leave more than I wanted to know. He didn't speak to me for a while after that.

We saw each other around, of course. He and Kate were there the night Mandy invited me to my first punk concert. Mandy was standing at the back of the crowd, hoisting people up over a sea of arms.

She turned to me and asked, "do you want to crowdsurf?"

I wasn't sure but I nodded, thinking this was a once in a lifetime opportunity, and stepped onto her interlocked fingers. She heaved me onto the crowd and a million fingers carried me

towards the stage. We'd chosen a bad time, though. The song was slowing and I came down headfirst as quickly as I'd gone up. A man spilled his beer on me – all over my hair and my converse – the smell was pungent. When I stood up, I was face to face with an older woman who was quite upset about this.

“You're gonna get brain damage!” She screamed as I ducked into the crowd. When I made it back to where Mandy and the others were hanging out, Eli and Kate had gotten into a fight and left.

Kids like Jake and Mandy hung out in the student lounge every day after school. Mimi and I would meet after classes ended and walk over there together. I wasn't ever comfortable with inserting myself, but one day Mimi couldn't stay after school. Thinking I was more comfortable with everyone than I really was, I headed for the student lounge after the last bell on my own. It was pretty crowded that day, and my usual group was sitting in a big circle on the floor. They didn't seem to notice me come in, and it hit me that maybe they didn't really want me there. It was too late to leave, so in a panic I sat down next to a garbage pail across the room.

I didn't think anyone would think it was strange that I was hanging out in the lounge, since I was there every day. Besides, it was so busy that day I figured those kids could barely see me from where they sat. I took out a homework packet and got to work, pondering how long I'd stick around for. I figured those guys would probably head out to the deli or the park soon, anyway – I could only hope.

There was a tap on my shoulder. I looked up to see Eli towering over me. I put down my pen and shot him a quiet, “hey.”

“You should come sit with us,” he suggested, and tilted his head towards the other side of the room, where the rest of the kids were chattering.

I told him “that’s ok,” said something about not wanting to annoy anyone and immediately regretted it – who says that?

His face was still. “You’re not annoying anyone,” he deadpanned, and led me over to the group. The rest of that day, Eli made sure I was included in whatever we were doing. When I tried to stay behind from the walk to the deli, he came back and got me. I was relentless in excluding myself, and he was equally determined to involve me in all activities.

After that, I was a part of the group, regardless of whether Mimi was around or not.