

FAITH

“Landon, guess who I nailed last night...” Hunter said.

“What? When?” I asked, while Julian turned on the TV. The NFL playoffs were happening in half an hour.

“At Ashley’s party.”

“What are you talking about? I was with you the whole time.”

“I forgot my phone there, so I went back.”

I took the can of beer from Julian and drank. “Julian, where did you buy this crap?”

“My brother brought it from his trip to Brazil,” Julian said. “We were supposed to have it cold.”

“Cold?” I said. “Is that to hide the fact that it’s bad?” I sat next to Hunter on the couch.

“Who cares, man, it’s beer,” Julian turned to Hunter. “So, who’d you nail last night?”

I took another sip.

“Faith Brown.” Hunter smirked.

I choked on the bad beer.

“*Virgin Mary?*” Julian said.

“Ooh yeah!” Hunter said.

“Man, I *knew* she was a little slut!” Julian laughed. “Doesn’t she go to your grandfather’s church, Landon?”

“Yes...” I said.

I knew Faith. We weren’t friends but her family was close to mine. When I was a kid and was forced to go to church every Sunday, I used to sit next to her, and we’d play after the service. My grandfather treated her like his very own granddaughter, and our parents used to dream we’d end up together.

“How did that happen?” I asked.

“Well, she was drunk, like... *very* drunk,” Hunter said.

“Really?” Julian said. “I didn’t think she drank. Isn’t that against God’s rules?”

“Who cares? She was drunk.” Hunter shrugged. “After I got my phone I went to the bathroom and she was there, on the floor, sleeping—”

“Dude! Not in the bathroom...” Julian said.

“Let me finish, asshole,” Hunter said. “I woke her up and offered to get her to Ashley’s bedroom...And then I nailed her!”

“Sweet!” Julian high-fived Hunter.

“Wait, was she unconscious?” I asked.

“No, man. Didn’t you hear what I just said? I woke her up.” Hunter took the drink from me. “Dude, we really need to get some ice for this beer—”

I snatched the drink back. “Hunter, you said you only woke her up to get her to a bedroom—”

“And I did!” Hunter said. “We had sex *in the bedroom*...”

“Was she awake?”

“Yes, Landon, she was awake.”

“But did she want to sleep with you?”

“What the hell, Landon?” Hunter said. “Are you asking me if I raped her?”

“Dude.” Julian turned to me.

“I’m not... asking that.” I moved around on the couch, looking at the beer in my hand. “I’m just asking if she wanted...”

“I didn’t *ask* her if she wanted, if that’s what you mean. I kissed her and she didn’t push me away. That’s consent enough for me.” Hunter smirked.

“Yeah, no one goes ‘*hey, you wanna have sex with me?*’” Julian said. “It just... happens.”

“Yeah, like you and Zoey.” Hunter looked at me. “Weren’t you two drunk the first time you got together?”

“I guess...” I shrugged.

The first time Zoey and I hooked up, we were both drunk at the homecoming dance. In fact, the only reason Zoey and I were currently dating was because of that alcohol that finally got us out of our

flirting-but-not-doing-anything-else state. But... we weren't so drunk we were passing out on the floor. I remembered everything, and so did she...

But who was I to say that Faith didn't remember? Maybe she did want to hook up with Hunter and the alcohol only gave her courage to act on it.

"I'm sorry, you're right." I shrugged.

"Yeah man, chill," Hunter tapped me on the back. "Hey, the game is about to start. Julian, turn the volume on!"

I'd woken up at Hunter's feeling nauseous, probably because of the bad beer from the day before, and texted my mother asking if she could pick me up before going to the service. I didn't say goodbye to the boys before I left.

When we got to the church, I didn't even realize I was looking for Faith until I noticed she wasn't there. When her family came to greet mine, I asked Mrs. Brown about her and she said Faith was feeling sick that weekend.

Once we were back at my home, I'd around three missed calls from Hunter and Julian that I ignored. I didn't know exactly why. I wasn't mad at them or anything. I entered my room and phoned Zoey.

"Hey, babe." She yawned. "Are you OK? It's 9AM."

"Can I ask you something?"

"Did something happen?" Zoey's voice sobered up.

"Not really..." I cracked my fingers. "Did you want to hook up with me... on homecoming?"

"Are you kidding me? If you waited a minute longer to kiss me, I would've screamed!"

"But I never asked...you know, if you wanted..."

"What's this about, babe?"

"Nothing." I shook my head. "I gotta go."

"Landon—" Zoey began but I hung up, rubbing my temples. My head ached like hell.

I collapsed on the bed and slept the rest of the day.

Faith sat behind me on Geometry, so it was easy to notice she was absent on Monday morning. I only saw her on Wednesday during lunch time when Julian made a joke about how Hunter should join his girlfriend at the choir table.

“What’s this about?” Zoey asked.

“Landon didn’t tell you?” Julian asked. “Hunter screwed *Virgin Mary!*”

“It’s none of my business.” I shrugged.

“And none of yours as well, Julian,” Zoey said. “And stop calling her that!”

“Yeah, I guess I can’t call her ‘virgin’ anymore.” Julian chuckled.

“Julian, move on...” Hunter said. “She wasn’t even that great.”

I pushed my tray. “I’m not that hungry.”

“You left the court saying you were starving,” Zoey said.

“Well, I’m not anymore.” I got up. “I’ll be in the library. I need to get some homework done.”

I could swear Faith was watching me as I left the cafeteria, even if I didn’t dare myself to look over where she was sitting.

I met Zoey on the parking lot after school. My headache – that hadn’t gone away since Sunday morning, didn’t matter how many aspirins I’d already taken since then – was only getting worse thanks to the southern sun.

“Ready?” Zoey asked.

“I think I’m gonna walk home.”

“Walk home?” Zoey frowned. “You forgot, didn’t you?”

“What?”

“Hunter invited us over to test his new jacuzzi?”

I closed my eyes. “Fuck... I forgot.”

“Are you alright, Landon?”

“I’m just stressed with the game this weekend,” I said. “I think I’ll pass on the jacuzzi.”

“Alright, well...” Zoey looked over my shoulder. “The boys are waiting for me...”

I looked behind me. Hunter and Julian were waving at us near Hunter’s car.

“You’re still going?”

“Well, yeah...” Zoey said. “Is there a problem?”

“No!” I choked. “I mean, I thought you’d want to come over... we could watch that new Netflix series you were talking about... the one with the chess, is it?” I said. “I could really use the distraction.”

Zoey studied my face for a while, then opened a smile. “Let’s go!”

My migraine finally got the best of me on Thursday, forcing me to stay home. Zoey called me during the break, and I could hear Hunter and Julian in the background making fun of the fact that I was anxious about the game.

My mother entered my room with a cup of coffee.

“How are you feeling?”

“The same as ten minutes ago,” I said taking the cup from her.

She sat at the foot of the bed. “Are you sure is just a headache, honey?”

“Yeah.” I shrugged. “What else would it be?”

“I don’t know... you’ve been off all week.”

“I’m just stressed with the game.”

“It’s what Zoey said yesterday,” she said. “But I think if that was it, you’d be shooting hoops nonstop at the court, not lying on your bed all morning.”

I shook my head. “Mom...”

“Alright, I’ll go—”

“How do you know when someone wants something?”

She looked at me.

“Well, you can ask them...”

“No, but like... when you’re kissing...” I moved in my place. “How do you know if the other’s OK with it?”

“You can ask them,” she repeated.

“Does Dad ask for permission every time he kisses you?”

She laughed. “Of course. It’s body language... he comes close to me, I get close to him, he looks into my eyes, I–”

“You can stop now,” I begged.

She giggled.

“And what if they’re drunk?”

My mother thought for a moment.

“I guess it depends on how drunk they are.” She looked at me. Her expression shifted from a warming concern to cold serious. She didn’t say anything. It wasn’t as if she was waiting for me to take my time with it, but more as if she was having second thoughts on whether she wanted to hear what I was about to say or not. She only opened her mouth again when she realized I wasn’t saying anything. “What’s wrong, Landon?”

I shook my head. “Nothing.”

“Are you sure?”

“I’m sure.”

She watched me for a while then got up. “Will you come down for lunch?”

“Yeah, I’ll be down in a minute.”

Hunter and Julian came over after school. Zoey had cheerleading practice, so she didn’t join them, which was a weird relief. I tried to get rid of them saying I wasn’t feeling better, but I guess they couldn’t hear ‘no.’ As they talked about the team and how we were going to kick the butt of the Oakville’ Tigers next week, my mind drifted away, and I caught myself watching Hunter’s face.

I didn’t know what I was expecting to find. He was just... Hunter. The same guy I met at freshman year on the basketball try-outs and had my first beer with on the way to my first party where we talked about the girls we liked in our class – when I figured I was falling for Zoey, he’d been the first person to know and he was the first one to tell me to go for it.

But then I saw Faith, just behind Hunter’s shoulders, her big eyes staring right back at me. I shook my head and she vanished – my migraine was driving me insane.

“Landon? Are you even listening to us?” Hunter asked.

“What?” I said, breaking out of my reverie. “Sorry, I said I wasn’t feeling well. I think I need some sleep.”

The next morning, I woke up to a text from Julian:

‘No basketball 2day. That little bitch virgin mary reported hunter for sexual assault, he’s at the precinct rn. I’ll keep you posted.’

I’d been reading that text over and over for the past ten minutes. As if she’d noticed I was up, my mother knocked on my door. “Landon, I need to talk to you.”

I didn’t reply. I couldn’t. My voice had disappeared and all the words in the world had been erased from the dictionaries. Everything was just a very loud silence.

“Landon?” She entered my room. I didn’t look at her.

She sat on the bed in front of me and noticed the phone in my hand.

“I just talked to Faith’s parents. They said your friend... Landon, look at me.”

When I raised my chin, I could only see Faith’s face. The eyes waiting and pleading for help.

“What you asked me a few days ago about consent...” my mother’s voice echoed somewhere in my room. I couldn’t pay attention – Faith wouldn’t stop staring at me.

I looked down at my screen again, but my mother snatched my phone from me and read the text. “Were you talking about this? Did you know?”

I stared at my empty hands.

“Landon! Say something!”

I was gonna throw up. The world was spinning – the only thing that didn’t seem to move was the bed, where Faith was still locking eyes on me, still in silence, still waiting.

“I – I’m sorry,” I whispered.

“Landon.” My mom lowered her voice. “If Hunter confessed something to you, *you* have to let me know.”

“I –” my phone started ringing. I looked at the caller ID before my mother’s hands turned it off. It was Zoey.

I looked at the poster of ‘The Texas Chainsaw Massacre’ on my closet – Zoey and I went to see it on our first date. Then I looked at the framed picture of the team on my shelf. Hunter and I together holding the trophy of our first championship.

And then I looked at the rockets printed on my blanket. I used to be obsessed with space when I was a kid. I asked Faith one time if she believed that if the astronauts went high enough, they’d reach God...

I looked up and found her eyes again, still waiting for me to say something – but this time, the words were coming back to me.

“Landon?”

I opened my mouth.

“Go on,” she said.

And then, with a quavering voice, I told her everything.

RESPONSIVE CRITICAL UNDERSTANDING

My idea for *Faith* came from a question I've always asked myself when I read stories – either in fiction or real life – about sexual assault:

Who's talking to the boys?

This is not to say the stories about the victims are not important – because they are extremely important – but there's another side to it. Another perspective. In 2015, Brock Turner sexually assaulted a student at Stanford University. The news was all about him. Meanwhile, no one was talking about Peter Johnson and Carl-Fredrik Arndt, the two boys that saved the girl. On that matter, Alexis Jones, founder of ProtectHer, said: "All media ever wants to talk about are the bad apples or the guys messing up, when there are so many guys doing it right. (...) Those are the kind of stories that have the ability to change our entire culture, because you can't become what you can't see." (2018).

According to Emmons (2018), external conflict is simply what happens in the story, while internal conflict is why it matters. As we follow Landon's journey, we see a boy struggling with internal conflict, and the reader is left wondering: *what is he going to do about it?* We see how – in choosing silence, as he desperately tries to ignore the fact his best friend has committed a felony – the burden of knowing the truth is mentally exhausting Landon to the point he starts hallucinating Faith's imagery. "What is the source of our first suffering? It lies in the fact that we hesitated to speak. It was born in the moment when we accumulated silent things within us." (Bachelard, 1983).

"Round characters feel affected by the story's events because they suffer their consequences and learn from them which makes them more realistic and believable." (Liternauts, 2015). It took a lot of edits to bring in more depth to the story. At first, Landon was a very flat character. He already knew the difference between right and wrong and his silence lasted only until the next morning, when he heroically approaches Faith and promises to do right by her. It took workshop feedbacks and a huge creative risk to bring more complexity and realism to the piece.

In my first drafts, Faith was a character that Landon directly interacted with. I grappled a lot with whether I should keep it that way or not. I was concerned about doing Faith justice. However, I realized that if she actively made an appearance, the story would be about her and how she overcomes her trauma. But this was not the story I wanted to tell. I wanted to tell Landon's story, as he breaks free of the toxic masculinity culture by choosing to speak up against his friend. "Will you be man enough to stand up to other men when you hear stories about sexual harassment? Will you stand up and do something so that one day we don't have to live in a world where a woman has to risk everything and come forward to say the words '*me too*'?" (Baldoni, 2018).

At the end, Faith's name became the story's title. It was a way to give her a meaning even greater than it would be if she was an active character. She became the story's theme and symbol of hope.

REFERENCE LIST

Primary Sources

Abbie Emmons (2018). *The secret to irresistible internal conflict (hook your readers on page 1)*. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oiR42apkOy4&t=100s> (Accessed at: 15 December 2020)

Bachelard, G. (1983). Epigraph. In: Heaney, S. *An Open Letter*. University of Michigan: Field Day Theatre Company.

Liternauts (2015). *How To Give Depth To Your Characters*. Available at: <https://www.liternauts.com/how-to-give-depth-to-your-characters/> (Accessed at: 15 December 2020)

Talks at Google (2018). *Why We Need Men | Alexis Jones | Talks at Google*. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7G9tX0wZptM&feature=youtu.be> (Accessed: 14 December 2020)

TED (2018). *Why I'm done trying to be "man enough" | Justin Baldoni*. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Cetg4gu0oQQ&feature=youtu.be> (Accessed at: 14 December 2020)

Secondary Sources

Jensen, K. (2017). *The Male Savior Narrative In YA Lit And Beyond Has To Go*. Available at: <https://bookriot.com/male-savior-ya-lit/> (Accessed at: 15 December 2020)

McNulty, B. (n.d). *External and internal conflict: Examples and tips*. Available at: <https://www.nownovel.com/blog/difference-external-internal-conflict-writing/>. (Accessed: 15 December 2020)

Protect Her. (2020) Directed by Sarah Hirsh Bordo [Online]. USA: Women Rising. [Viewed 12 December 2020]. Available from Amazon Prime.

The Mask You Live In. (2015) Directed by Jennifer Siebel Newsom. [Online]. USA: Virgil Films. [Viewed 13 December 2020]. Available from Netflix.