

## FORGIVING THE SUN

“Great idea, Lochan. Very original,” Theo said from the backseat of Loch’s yellow jeep. We had just been kicked out of our own senior prom because Lochan had planned on spiking the punch, but Grumpy Larry caught us mid-act and threw us out of the gymnasium. We couldn’t go home because our parents would ask questions, so we were just driving with no destination through town.

“Oh, shut up Theo, you were the first on board with this idea,” Evan said.

“Alright, what is the plan now?” I asked from the passenger’s seat.

“I don’t know.” Lochan shrugged without taking his eyes of the road. “Waffle House?”

“Oh, great! I can’t believe we went from *‘spiking the punch’* to Waffle House!” Theo complained.

“You’re saying you don’t want those Oreo Waffles?” I said, looking at him through the rearview mirror.

“Whatever.” Theo rolled his eyes. We all laughed. Theo never admitted defeat. Ever.

Lochan was about to make the curve that would get us to the Waffle House street when suddenly there was a jolt and a loud pop, followed by the sound of deflating air.

“Please, God, no,” Loch said. He unfastened his seatbelt and opened the car door.

“Fuck man, I want those Waffles now!” Theo said.

“You were *just* complaining about the Waffle House,” said Evan.

I pressed the button so my window would go down and I put my face out of the door so I could see Loch. He was kneeling on my side, looking at the left front tire.

“Is it bad? Do we need to call for back-up?” I asked.

“No, I’ll just have to change it,” he said “Emma, can you – ”

Another noise. Smoke started to come out of the car's hood. Lochan closed his eyes, trying to pretend it hadn't happened. I unbuckled my seatbelt, getting out of the vehicle along with Theo and Evan and we met Loch facing the jeep. He opened the hood – between the smoke I could hear something leaking.

“How old is this car?” I asked.

“Older than Grumpy Larry probably,” Evan answered.

“My baby!” Lochan cried.

“Dude, you really need a new car.” Theo squeezed Loch's shoulder.

“I'll call for back-up,” I said and went to get my phone from inside the jeep. Lochan followed me, grabbing his backpack in the trunk.

We joined Theo and Evan, who were sitting on the sidewalk opposite to the car in case it burst into flames. As I was calling for assistance, Loch took something out of the backpack. Three flasks.

“Alright, thank you,” I hung up, “they'll be here in twenty minutes.” I turned to Lochan. “What is that?” I pointed to the flasks.

“Well, I was planning on giving you guys these at prom but since we got kicked out,” Loch started, “I didn't just buy the flask we tried to use tonight. I bought these three as well. One for each. Oh, and they are full.” He handed the flasks to us. “Check out the lid.”

There was an *E* engraved on the top of mine.

“Our initials?” Evan asked.

Lochan nodded and showed the *L* in his own. I hadn't noticed it earlier.

“High school is ending. We're all going to different places,” Lochan said, “I just wanted something for each of us to hold on to. Something to remember.”

“Lochan and his big, mushy heart,” said Theo.

“Let’s make a promise. We can’t drink from these flasks if we are apart,” Lochan said.

“Oh man, that means I won’t be able to get rid of your ugly face?” said Evan.

“Mean!” I elbowed him and turned to Lochan. “Only when we’re together”.

“Only when we’re together,” repeated Theo and Evan. We lifted our flasks, saluting and then taking a sip. I looked at each of my friend’s faces. Lochan was right, everything was going to change. I would miss my life with them and all our countless stories - from being trapped inside Evan’s apartment elevator on Halloween, to Theo breaking his little toe from kicking the table after losing to me on *NBA Live*, or when we sneaked into the school late at night on junior year to skateboard through the hallways. I knew tonight had earned its place in our memory album. Although we weren’t actually in it, it was the best prom ever.

A month after that night, I was home in a freezing afternoon. I could swear it was raining hailstones instead of water, even if the weather channel proved me wrong. I was pouring popcorn into a bowl to watch a documentary about Orcas at Sea World when my phone rang and Loch’s goofy face appeared on screen.

“Whatever you want, the answer is no,” I greeted him.

“I received my college letter!” he screamed on the other side of the line.

“And?!” I said excited, making my way back to the couch with my bowl of popcorn.

“I don’t know yet. I am on my way now!”

“Your way where?”

“To your house. We opened your acceptance letter together, we are doing the same with mine!”

“Loch, it’s like a storm outside!”

“Who cares? Emma, this is the day we’ll find out if our plans of living in New York together are gonna come true!”

Loch and I had been planning this since freshman year. In fact, our love for New York was one of our first conversations ever. It was the first week of high school, and all four of us were having lunch in the cafeteria when Theo asked what our favorite city in the world was, and Loch and I answered NYC at the same time. After school, Lochan and I were on the bus and we babbled so much about it that I missed my stop. Ever since, we’ve been planning on applying to the same college, sharing a flat, and talking about how every other weekend we’d drive in Loch’s jeep back to town to see Evan, Theo and our families.

“Okay, hurry up! I am excited!” I said.

“Alright! I’ll see you in fifteen minutes!”

“Make it ten!” I said and turned him off. I closed my eyes, smiling, knowing deep down in my heart that Loch’s letter said he was accepted, and everything was going to be fine.

It is a sunny day. I can look down at the beach and see children playing catch with a German Shepherd. Birds are singing and an ice cream truck just passed by. Today looks like one of those fake yoghurt commercials. I hate every second of it. Noel Gallagher said that if he had a gun, he’d shoot a hole into the sun, and I support that. I fucking hate the sun. I hate the green grass I am standing on. I hate how everyone is in the usual dress code of black clothes and tears. I hate Lochan’s old yellow jeep and I hate Lochan for never making it to my house that afternoon.

I feel weak and tired. For the past five days, every time I closed my eyes at night I pictured Lochan’s crash. Food was making me sick and seeing people felt like a nightmare. Evan and Theo tried to visit me a couple of times but I asked my mom to send them away. I just stayed in my room most of the time, staring out the window, waiting to see Lochan parking his car in front of my house. It never happened.

I'm not paying attention to anything the priest is saying. I don't even notice when he's done, and everyone starts to approach the closed casket to put things in between the flowers. My plan was to put his acceptance letter there as well, but I can't get my feet to move. I fold the letter and put it back in my jeans pocket, as everyone starts to walk away from my friend.

"Honey?" I feel my mom's grasp on my shoulder. "It's over, are you coming to the wake?"

"No," I say.

"Are you sure, sweetheart? Loch would want —"

"Well, he's not here, is he?!" I yell, turning around to face my mom. I can tell she has been crying. I get it. Lochan was like a son to her. I want to hug and tell her everything is going to be OK but I can't.

I see Evan and Theo running in our direction. When they reach us, Evan stops in front of me and I can see Theo talking to my mom.

"Hey," Evan says, "are you ok?"

"What do you think?" I answer.

Theo joins us a second later and I see my mom walking back to her car.

"I said we'll take care of this one. And that we are walking to the wake," Theo says, more to Evan than to me, even though I am standing right there.

"I am not going to the wake," I repeat.

"Yes, you are," Evan says.

"No, I am not. You're wasting your time staying behind." I push him away from me. I turn around to face Lochan's casket again.

"But we are not staying behind for you. You are just a minor inconvenience," Theo says. He walks past me and goes even closer to Loch's casket. He takes something out of his blazer's pocket, and as

soon as I realize what it is, my heart freezes. Lochan's flask. "I came to give this to Loch, otherwise, we'll never be able to drink from our flasks ever again." He places the flask between the flowers.

"And *that* is the real tragedy here," Evan says, putting his arm around my shoulder. He takes something out of his messenger bag and hands it to me. My own flask. I turn to face him with the question in my eyes.

"We sneaked into your house before we came here. You and your mother were already gone," he explains.

Evan shoves his hand down to his bag again and takes the remaining two flasks, handing one to Theo.

"To Loch," Theo salutes. Evan and I lift our hands, repeating the words in harmony, then we all take a sip. Theo walks to join my other side and puts his arm around my shoulder as well. It's like the boys are forming a shell around me and it feels as if it's the safest place I could possibly be on a day like this - even if we are standing in the middle of a graveyard. I feel my heart softening, like somehow being with them means I am safe to grieve.

"Come on. Let's go tell Mr. Patterson that his old bottle of Jack Daniel's is more water than whiskey," Evan says.

"Are you trying to get us *all* killed?" Theo asks. I laugh, painfully, as I agree to it.

Theo and I both hand our flasks to Evan, and he puts all three away in his bag.

The boys don't take their arms from over my shoulders and I open mine to hold on to their waists as we make our way out of the graveyard onto the sidewalk.

"You know, Emma, I remember the day I met you," Theo says, "It was lunch, and Loch invited you to sit with us in the cafeteria on our first day of freshman year. My first thought was *'fuck, Loch got himself a girlfriend, the party is ruined!'*"

I kick Theo's ankle. He keeps going –

“But then you saw my Nirvana t-shirt and started talking to me about it and I was like *‘fuck, I am in love with Loch’s girlfriend.’*”

I kick Theo’s ankle again. He grunts.

“I think inviting you to our table was the best decision Loch ever made in his entire life. He gave us you,” Evan says and I burst into tears. We stop in the middle of the sidewalk and they both hug me tight, Evan resting his chin on top of my head. One of them is also crying, I can hear it. Or maybe both, I don’t know. My eyes are closed, and I am trying to calm down by hearing Evan’s heartbeat. The sun shifts in the sky and shines down on the three of us. It’s so bright and warm. Silently, I forgive the sun.

## **RESPONSIVE CRITICAL UNDERSTANDING**

*Forgiving the sun* is a short story about friendship, grief and the unexpected events in life that shape our lives forever. I was inspired by Jeff Zentner's *Goodbye Days* (2018), one of my favorite coming-of-age novels from recent years.

In its first drafts, *Forgiving the Sun* took place entirely in one setting: Lochan's funeral. We followed Emma as she remembered the start of her friendship with Lochan, up until the day of his death. However, based on workshop feedbacks, the short-story suffered drastic changes until the final polished work.

Firstly, I realized that I had fallen in the trap of telling instead of showing. In one of my original lines, Emma talks about grabbing pizza with her friends and chatting about their favorite movies. However, that felt generic and it didn't give a personality to the characters. According to *Gotham Writers Workshop*, a character that looks like any other character is the most repelling thing you'll find in a story (2003, p. 28). For the following drafts, I crafted special memories that defined their friendship, and by the end of it I ended up making some of the most remarkable moments happen during the story. By doing that, the protagonist would not just be telling the readers about those moments but *living* them. Nevertheless, I still turned some lines to reminiscences – for instance, when Emma names some of their “countless stories” like skateboarding through the school's hallways in the middle of the night – but I took the opportunity to shape these memories so it'd be unique to my characters, other than just a casual thing any friend would do. In fact, our lecturer showed us in one session a video from his YouTube channel - Online Writing Tips - that explains that there's nothing wrong with telling, as long as we're writing about clear and explicit facts (2015).

Secondly, to start the story before Lochan's funeral helped me to shape more the personalities of my characters. Through dialogue, you can see how Theo works as the comic relief of the group, whilst Evan is the quiet and sarcastic one. The readers are also given a chance to know Lochan's sweet personality, which creates a connection between the audience and the character, thus enhancing the



feeling of sadness over his death and increasing empathy for Emma, as she grieves the loss of her friend.

The chronology was also fixed. In the first drafts, Emma's narration of the events that led to the unfortunate day of Lochan's funeral generated confusion in some readers. "Flashbacks can be confusing to a reader unless you clearly delineate them, remembering to anchor them to the story's present." (Gotham Writers' Workshop, p. 170). Since I decided to turn the flashbacks into actual events of the plot that followed a chronological order, it was easier to understand where in time things were taking place.

When we come to the funeral, there's a shift in the narrative tense to signalize that we've reached the present day. I also decided to do this so there's a feeling of nostalgia and remorse over what happened.

My choice to write in first-person was because I wanted to make it personal and melancholic. When you read in first person, you're seeing things through the narrator's eyes and feeling what they're feeling. "The main advantage of first person is intimacy. The writer can eliminate almost all distance between the reader and the story by placing the reader into the narrator's skin" (Gotham Writers' Workshop, p. 80).

By my final drafts, I was starting to feel pleased with the story, but I still felt like something was missing. I discussed it with my workshop tutor and by the end of it, it was established that I needed to add more depth to the protagonist's grief. A sense of helplessness that would get readers concerned for her. That's when I wrote the paragraph that Emma talks about feeling weak and tired due to lack of sleep and food and reveals that she has been isolating herself from everyone since Lochan's death. This could be signalized as depression, which is one of the five stages of grief.

It's possible to notice more of these stages. "The stages of grief are a part of the framework that makes up our learning to live with the one we lost." (Kubler-Ross and Kessler, 2005). You can see denial when Emma talks about looking through the window expecting Lochan to show up in the days following his accident. However, anger is the predominant stage. The protagonist spends most of the

funeral listing things that she hates, and even blames Lochan for dying. It's only in the end, when she's finally with her friends, that she comes to terms with the tragedy ("*Acceptance*") and allows herself to cry.

In its early versions, I used pathetic fallacy – a commonly used technique coined by art critic John Ruski, that means the personification of human emotions in nature, animals or inanimate objects, according to The Poetry Foundation (n.d) - so the weather would match the melancholic setting. However, I considered what would be the irony of a happy and sunny morning on the worst day of Emma's life. I used Noel Gallagher's *If I Had a Gun* (2011) to express her anger towards the day, in the lyrics "*If I had a gun, I'd shoot a hole into the sun*". In the end, the protagonist sets herself free from that rage and allows herself to cry over Lochan's death. She finds herself "*forgiving the sun*", thus crediting the title.

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