

Trigger Warning: Grief/Suicidal Thoughts.

One in Six

By Chris Loveland

I grip the die as I would any other day. The formerly sharp edges are dull from their countless rolls. I say aloud, “Four” and twirl my hand as if that could affect the outcome. I have carved out a spot in the center of the desk in order to let the die find its natural rest. Superstitions haunt my conscience despite my otherwise heavily atheist and scientific foundation. Thus, a small blank space sits in the heart of my cluttered bureau, as to not disturb the outcome. The die drifts off the palm of my hand destined for the table. A slow chill crawls up my spine. My stomach knocks and turns as if my life depends on this roll. The plastic cube clacks against the bare center of the cluttered, pristine oak top.

Today is truly not more important than any other. I have a meeting with some potential clients, but I always have a meeting with some potential clients. My life lately is one long meeting. I barely even spend time in the office anymore. Everything is budgeted. A few minutes here, an hour at that lunch, seventy-five minutes in a meeting, forty-five minutes in the gym, two hours for drinks with some of our more lucrative clients, then I can actually begin to work. All of this time spent with clients seems so bizarre. We are—unfortunately—all straight men, yet our interactions feel as if each of us is attempting to bed the other. I put on more cologne to meet with a potential investor than I would for the few fleeting nights I once spent with Her. I go to the gym not for my health, I couldn’t care less about my health, I want to look good for these men with money who decide my fate on a whim.

The die bounces twice and rattles to a halt, the sound like that of a snake baring its fangs. I no longer look at the number, I just wait to see if the snake has decided to bite today. I don't believe in God, but I do believe in fate. Today, that harsh snake of fate decides to take my side.

I used to just handle numbers. I loved it. Numbers were so easy for me, because they were far more than digits. They were lives encapsulated in values, and each number meant something. There is no such thing as an anomaly. Every deviation matters, every speck of data must be inspected in order to make a quality investment. I would run my numbers, then I would come back to a lively home. I was so happy then.

I slip my suit on noticing that the tailor's work is beginning to undo itself due to my inability to do mine. Each day it feels like the shirt fits a little worse, and the pants slip up my leg just a quarter centimeter. I skip breakfast and storm into the elevator. As I exit my building I'm met by the tinted grey sky. The city always feels so grey--She used to say that these were the best days. She said you can make grey into anything.

A car waits for me outside. Another emergency meeting to start the day. "Emergency" is certainly not the right term, but that's what the office always calls it.

The day melts by in one long, superficial blur. I come back home; my one stupid salvation. I collapse on the couch in a lacking living room, once loaded with life. Every day a small part of me thinks if I sit on this couch in this spot in this room I can still feel Her. If I change nothing She's still here. If I sit here on my spot right next to Hers I can at least imagine the tickle of Her hand on my neck again. I can feel Her laughter permeating through the room. I never make anyone laugh. That's how I knew She loved me.

My eyelids are getting heavy but I know I shouldn't fall asleep on the couch. Everyone always says it's bad for your back. Honestly for my age, my back is fine. My father at this age was barely able to move some days because of his back. His bulky frame was always exhausted and aching. I am not like him though. Thank God.

I stroll into the kitchen in search of something very specific. The kitchen is barren. My past life as the chef of the house is now wholly missing. I grab a small glass from the cabinet. All the glasses are in a nice line begging for my hand. I reach up to the top cabinet and pull out a half-full bottle. I only drink once every 30 days, as to not build a tolerance. Without a tolerance you cannot build an addiction. I am no addict. Today is the 30th day though and my body yearns for the burn of the liquid. I cannot wait for my thoughts to be mercifully slurred again.

The door I haven't even thought to use in two years stares at me as I fill my glass with the mahogany colored liquid. I never used to drink. She didn't so I didn't either. There was no fight, no request, I just had no desire. Now I do.

That door is not just a door. It was a portal into Her world. I cannot bear to reopen that portal. Instead I just down the liquid in my glass, fill another, and retreat back to my couch.

I awake on my couch in a frenzy. My life is timed and I keep forgetting to set the alarm. I have three missed calls, and I am supposed to be at a meeting with our eighth largest investor six minutes ago. My head radiates with pain from the therapeutic night before. I sprint into my room and head right to the table and call out my ceremonial four. The die barely matters today, my mind is instead mapping out the quickest route to Per Se, an expensive French restaurant smack dab in between Midtown and Uptown. If I still had my bike it would only take me about seven

minutes, but then my suit would be creased and I would be sweaty—I wave my cupped hand. I could take a cab, but that means I have to depend on traffic, and the driver. Those are two variables I cannot afford to leave to chance. The die slips out of my hand—with me barely even remembering its significance. Besides I hate being in traffic, it's so oppressive. Walking is simply out of the question, that would be twenty-five maybe even thirty minutes. The die clacks on the oak. Four has landed.

Pristine metallic chains come ripping out of the bed. Two handcuff my hands, one binds my mouth, and two attach around my legs. The chains yanks my body with a force that I cannot believe it can withstand, and ultimately I am pinned to the bed. I haven't been trapped here in twenty days; a major statistical anomaly, so this was bound to come. It was beginning to become worrisome that the chains weren't coming.

As minutes drip by, I slowly stop mapping my route to Per Se. I assume the office has sent a replacement. I never did quite land on how I would have even gotten there. I probably would have taken the A Train from 103, then hopped on the C at 59 and then gotten off at 57 and legged it from there. All in all eleven minutes, probably, if everything goes well. Besides I still would have been late; far too late. I lie motionless on my bed, drifting off into the consistent noise of New York City. The traffic plays like a vague melody only broken by the occasional siren or stray shout from below.

The housephone's eerie ding begins to sound, ripping through the white noise of the city. This ding is a sound that I dread more than any other. Finally the voicemail plays. Her long lost voice sings, "McCormick residence, we can't take your call right now..." I'm mouthing the words with her. I've listened to that recording a million times. It helps, I think.

“Lucas, you have to come in today. You’ve been so good lately. Don’t ruin it. Eventually the board will just have to vote you out.” The binds tighten at the sound of Sylvia’s voice. “I can’t keep saving you.” A loud dial tone sounds. Sylvia built the personal side of our business. Sylvia could actually speak to people. I rattle my wrists in the chain. I’m not afraid of losing my job. I love my numbers, but I hate the job. I just have to stay with it in order to keep my apartment. I can’t lose our home; no matter what.

The alcohol of last night is taking its toll on me now. A small part of me is nauseous, while the rest is starving. I’m thirsty and so full of liquid all at once. I’m still not used to hangovers. They always hit me like a runaway train. How is it that even on the nights when my father drank himself to sleep on the couch he never woke up with even a hint of a headache? I guess he never hinted at pain, even when I needed him to.

My wrist itches against the shackle. These shackles are soothingly clean, yet they haunt me. The worst part about it all is the itches. I once had an itch on my arm that persisted for around sixteen hours. I always think they will just go away eventually. They never do. Nothing unaddressed ever goes away on its own.

The chains exist how they do and they take the time they take. I have tried to get a sense on their timing, but simply nothing ever slightly correlated. One Sunday--April sixth I believe--two years ago they were gone in four minutes. Yet, on that very same date April sixth this year I was pinned to the bed for two whole days. I was hungry and thirsty, but ultimately resigned to my fate. If the chains killed me, they killed me. The board almost voted me out that very same Wednesday, April eighth. Sylvia vouched for me. I was given a few extra sick days and a slap on the wrist. I burned through those sick days in less than two months.

I used to fight and shake against the shackles, now I just lie still. Raging against the icy steel brings me nothing but cuts on my wrist, and anguish. Now I know days just drift by, and I must learn to let them, because when the four hits I am utterly powerless. I am so incredibly powerless.

The chains recede back into the bed at four P.M. exactly. Despite their inconsistency they always manage to keep some semblance of order. An order this house never used to have. I continue lying on my bed for another eighteen minutes.

Finally I pick myself up. I only make it out to the living room. The chains exhaust me. I stare at the smooth leather chair in the corner. I have barely ever even used that silly chair, but buying a LazyBoy felt like something I was destined to do. My father lounged in his LazyBoy approximately five and a half hours a day. His hand hanging off the side with a small glass not unlike those that line my cabinet. I never understood the attraction to the large leather monstrosity, but the countless Sundays he spent in that chair brought him an unmistakable solace. He would smile and tell me about the football on the screen as I sat next to him dreaming of watching anything else. His happiness kept me hooked though, even as I could barely comprehend the rules and shied away from the hits on the screen, his enthusiasm kept me coming back to the small arm of the LazyBoy. Though this was a long time ago, a time even before the first die.

I was supposed to be at the gym now according to the schedule sent by the office. Then I should be beginning data analysis in one hour and sixteen minutes. I'm not going to do any of that.

The next day I awake in my bed. I feel a little better today. Yesterday off, and no hangover did me wonders. I stare up at the wall for seven minutes before mustering the courage to move.

I don't want to roll the die today. No part of me ever wants to roll the die. It's just what I have to do. Believe it or not there was a time in my life where I didn't live in fear of being trapped by chains. I lived a lot of my life in wonderful bliss actually. Only in my nightmares was I captured again by those chains, and when I awoke She was there to soothe me.

The first time I found the die was twenty-seven years ago. It shocks me just how long ago that was. It feels like it was only a few months ago still. I was lying on my bed staring at the wall. I felt so alone. I was so alone. I decided to complete a puzzle. Puzzles always helped, even in the darkest of moments. Besides, my father loved when I did puzzles. I was exercising the mind, he'd say--even though he never did them. I walked over to my closet and began rooting around the shelf full of board games. Life, Chess, Monopoly--all covered in dust--sat guarding the puzzles. I had once loved board games. Now I could barely stand to look at them.

The puzzle I wanted was of Captain Picard's fearless face. It was my only Star Trek toy, as my father thought the show was ludicrous. Instead he bought me lightsabers, and named me Lucas. Star Trek always just made more sense to me though, besides there was an actual plot and scientific thought involved. Unlike the imbecilic and ceaseless action of Star Wars--they were in space and didn't even consider the possibility of a lack of oxygen--Star Trek gave every aspect of the world some sort of thought. My father could never really see that though.

As I reached for my puzzle I ripped out a game I had jammed to the back of the shelf. A game I had buried four months earlier. A game my mother and I once spent the final fleeting

moments of her life playing. Yahtzee came spilling out of my shelf. Dice and notecards came dumping out. I quickly shoved everything back into the box and threw it back into the shelf, and went sprinting out of the room.

When I finally came back in seven hours later, there was a lone die laying on the ground staring at me. Without thinking I picked it up and rolled it. A four came, and so came the chains for the first of countless times.

Before then I did not even consider the possibility of the chains. Nobody else had them, but here I was: a fifteen year old boy bound to his bed. I was scared, but mostly I was just confused. I wracked and scoured every inch of my knowledge searching for any kind of clue as to what could possibly be happening to me. To this day, I still do not know.

The chains periodic appearance disappeared after one year, two months, and thirteen days. That was the day I met Her. She was an unattainably beautiful girl lounging comfortably in the back of my Advanced Topics Physics class.

I got them to stop so painfully simply. One day I just forgot to roll. I remember that day so clearly. I woke up at 6:33 (I never set my alarms on multiples of five) and hopped in the shower. I wanted to look nice that day, because I had a plan. I was going to sit in the back row of a class--which was very much outside of my routine--and I was going to say hi to that pretty girl. I returned into my room at 6:48, and began to put together an outfit. I must have gone and tried on each of the seventeen shirts I owned.

Nothing fit right, but by the time I was feeling at least moderately confident in something--a royal blue polo, khaki jeans, my royal blue sneakers, and my father's nicest Timex watch (that I was borrowing without his permission)--it was 7:50. I had to sprint to make it to

school on time. I made it to physics with only a matter of seconds. I never rolled the die, and nothing happened. I just didn't roll, and those wretched chains never emerged. I am convinced She was their only kryptonite. I asked Her to the movies after class. She laughed and said so simply, "You never go on a first date to the movies."

It's been twenty minutes exactly now. I have to start my day.

I glide back into my house. I made it through work today. I got barely anything done, but that's become the norm. I used to be the most productive person I've ever met, but those days are long behind me. As I enter the foyer of our empty apartment I decide I'm going to make up for some lost time. I head into my office to catch up on the work that I ignored today. It's only a little data analysis anyways, I used to love data analysis.

I sit down at my desk at 5:46 and crack open my laptop. I carve through numbers for twenty-five minutes. The traffic and sirens of New York wail against the white walls of the house. I have no idea why She wanted white. I wanted light blue, but She said that would the apartment feel like a baby boy's nursery.

I wish I could go back in time.

I wish I could beg Her for the son I never wanted. She wanted kids, but She knew I didn't and never really talked about it. Right now though, I wish I had something--anything living that had some semblance of Her attached to it. I used to have Her voicemails saved on my phone, but when I got a new one they were lost. That was the monday I was trapped for two days, actually.

This home office is probably the most spacious part of the house. I used to love working here. Well I used to love having work open in this office. She'd come home after me, and I'd be

sitting in here typing away. She'd go into her office--the room right next to this--and sit at her desk. Her desk was right next to the adjoining wall, and with her foot she would tap on the wall. It's melodic rhythm soothing my no doubt overworked mind. I miss that tapping so much. I used to drive myself insane with work. I thought it mattered more than anything. Now I see work for the pitiful men's club it is. The kind of place my father would fit into seamlessly had he had the ability to pretend to be knowledgeable with numbers like many of these other Type A men do. He never did make it into a job like this though. I did.

She and my father barely knew each other. He was always kind and caring to Her. He was like that to women, but he never showed an ounce of that to men, especially not to me--his only son.

My mom was all that my dad wasn't. My mom was gentle and caring. My mom would play with me for hours on end, even when she didn't understand the game. My mom didn't ever meet Her.

The time is 6:26. I have to get back to work, and yearn for that soft melodic tap on the wall that always used to come.

I am not going to roll that fucking die today.

My eyes open on this suspiciously bright Saturday morning. I have a schedule to keep. I'm going to brave the traffic and make it to Whole Foods. I'm going to go the gym. I'm going to be me again.

I made it stop once. I can do it again. I slip into our closet and pull out my favorite royal blue flannel and crisp pair of khaki's. I feel right. I exit my room without looking at that dresser or the nightmare that lays upon it.

I can do this. I can leave without rolling the die. I pass Her office, and drift into the foyer. Traffic beeping and cooing from below, the noises oddly coaxing me into their world. I open the front door and burst out if it. Today is my day. I press the elevator button. It dings. The doors open.

But I cannot step inside. I stand frozen in front of the elevator. I feel like I'm watching myself like a spectator now. I'm pleading for my feet to move, every breath is becoming a fight. My heart is sinking. The elevator doors close. I want to put myself in between them. This is my last chance, I plead with legs to move; they don't. Instead they turn me towards my door. My breathing is laboring even more. I'm suffocating in air. This has happened before, but normally I can't stop it. This time I can. I just have to roll the die and all will be right.

I sprint back into my bedroom and roll the die as fast as I can. My body is ripped in the air soundlessly. I collapse into my bed shackled once again. My back sinks in as my stretched limbs go limp in the silver binds. I am finally able to breathe again. I am trapped, but I completed the roll.

I remember the first time I had an episode like I just did. I was thirteen, and my father took me fishing. Mom had just had to start sleeping at the hospital again, and I was barely eating. I don't know why he thought fishing would help, but I guess he was trying. He made me put the bait on the hook. I still remember how it felt to stab the pristine silver metal of the hook through that writhing worm. I remember the heat of the tears down my cheek that I had unwillingly shed.

I wanted to impress him. Even as he assured me it was okay to not fish, I sent my first cast. It was picture perfect. The line dancing through the air, but my father's favorite royal blue rod was dancing awkwardly behind it. I hadn't let my father teach me, and I threw his favorite rod directly into the lake on that humid Illinois day.

My heart sank, but he didn't yell. He held me as I began to choke on the air. He wanted to help, but he didn't know how. He never knew how.

Two years ago Sundays were my days to be out. Either shopping for clothes, seeing a movie, seeing a performance on Broadway, or just generally exploring. That was back when I had Her as my tour guide.

Now I sit inside. I normally turn on the news on Sundays, to actually attempt to connect myself to the world. Today, though, is not a day I can bring myself to watch anything. It has been three years since Amtrak stole my life from me. Yet they continue to replay the disaster over the airwaves as if it is nothing. October fourth two thousand sixteen. The day my life changed. October fourth two thousand and nineteen. Today. The day my life stayed exactly the same.

There is something truly unbearable about the simplicity in which the stations report the day. Forty-four people dead, one hundred and four people injured, and one train mercilessly derailed due to nothing anybody could control. Yet, I still can't help but hate. I don't hate anything in particular, just everything.

Maybe if I had worn a different shirt that train would never have flipped. Maybe if I had taken a different route to work a city repairman would have seen the gap in the track. Maybe if I

had called her she would've missed that train. Maybe if I surprised her for dinner at her office she would be here. I replay that day in my mind constantly, thinking of what I could have done differently.

I can picture Her sunshine smile now. Feel Her light laughter tickling me. I loved Her so much. No. I love Her so much. She can't be gone. One day She will walk through that door in that Navy blue pantsuit she walked out in.

Our love was not out of a movie. We had nothing in common. We didn't finish each other's sentences. But with Her I was just--me. I was every ounce of me and never had to pretend to be anything else. I could be weird. I could care about my clothes. I could like stand-up comedy and musicals more than I liked football. I could listen to the music I liked, the kind where nobody is yelling at you. Most of all I could say whatever I felt like saying. I just hope She felt the same way. I think She did, but I guess I'll never truly know.

The day's gentle light has faded outside the massive window in the living room. I can't stop staring out it. Looking at the street below. Watching the lights of the city flicker, like the candles of a vigil that haunts my dreams.

I lie on my bed unable to sleep. I remember so vividly my first night terror from the die. I was sixteen when the die went away. When I was sixteen I was young, in love, and president of the Rocket Club. Between school, building rockets, dates with Her, and applying to college I barely had time to sleep, let alone think. It wasn't until I was 19 and living in an apartment off-campus with Her did I even become subconsciously afraid of the die.

I woke up that night in a sweat. I had been violently ripping my limbs around throughout the night, to the point where I awoke Her. She shook me awake. The fleeting things I could remember from the first dream included being trapped by the die in our apartment as water began to flood in. A royal blue rod floating on the surface. The rod knocking against my face threatening to lobotomize me as the water began to drown me.

I could not breathe for hours after the terror. I felt that same suffocating, and I was somehow watching myself like a movie. I was not me. I was a body of fear, and I had no control. Those terrors continued to pop up about monthly throughout college and grad school, but as I began work they began to be drowned out by my other fears: forgetting a presentation, missing a key anomaly, our apartment getting robbed, losing Her. The die began to slip from my mind. Terrors became a yearly occurrence, and my life was lived on. Until She was not there to save me anymore.

The die has let me be on this mundane Monday. The grey clouds settle in the sky as I stroll towards my office. I did not finish all of the data analysis I was supposed to have completed. Things like that used to bother me. That was back when I had an excuse to not do my work though. Now I am not inclined. I don't even know why I keep going to this job. I used to love the numbers, I used to care about the more than modest pay, I used to feel anything. There were days that I did not want to go, but there were also days that I did.

Sylvia greets me as I walk in. Her swamp-colored eyes pierce through me, and her jaw is clenched tight. By now I've learned this face. I've stood next to this face countless times. I built our company while this face made every hard decision I couldn't. We stroll together towards our

offices and across the massive main floor packed to the brim with cubicles. This walk is not two founders--two friends who met in graduate school--walking together, this walk is all part of the theater of the act she is about to commit. My eyes drift back to the office floor, lingering on the cubicles. I once tried to think of a way you could engineer these cubicles to be stacked. Humanely you can't really do it. Yet, these people in these cubicles have never really cared about humanity anyways.

“Lucas, can we talk?” Sylvia’s tone is hushed and hurried.

“Of course Sylvia. What about?” My voice is distant. I know she is trying to direct me to her office, but I want to make her do this here. Why? I don’t really know. I suppose this is the only moment in weeks I have felt a real emotion, and I’m not ready to let go of it. Or maybe I’m just cruel, maybe I just want to watch Sylvia try to fire me in front of everyone. Are they really going to let a founder go after one week of not submitting data analysis? I guess it’s been more than one week.

“C’mon, Lucas. Let’s just chat in my office.” I do not make an expression. I just look forwards. I know what’s coming. I should dread it. A huge piece of my world is crumbling, and I can’t even care.

“No. Fuck that. Do it here, or don’t do it at all.” I’m not angry but my voice is shaking. My hands nervously pull next to my pockets.

“Why? Why would you want that?” Sylvia’s face is so genuinely curious. Confusion is an emotion that is clearly new to her. Moments pass, and every cubicle has a head peeking out over it. “Alright, Lucas. I’m sorry, but it is the board’s decision that we have to let you go. You

have been a great employee, and worked to build this company but you just have not been the same since--”

“That has nothing to do with this. I lost interest in this faltering company. This market is going to eat us alive. You do not know this like I do.” I turn to the crowd as if I am some triumphant gladiator. “I quit on this place because this is a sinking ship. Without me none of this would exist. None of you would exist. You cannot be me. You cannot even try to be me.” Every single gaze in the room is bearing down upon me. I feel trapped in my own skin. This isn’t me. This feels like my father’s voice pouring through my own. None of this is me.

“Okay, Lucas, that was something. Are you done?”

The dull light of the refrigerator fights against the fading light of day shining through the large living room window. The two sources failing to fully illuminate the lifeless kitchen. My stomach softly growls, reminding me I have not eaten since I was fired, almost three days ago now. Most of my days I spend on the couch either watching TV or just staring out that massive window. I prefer the window. It feels like a real escape, not the momentary dulling the TV provides. I prefer to see the real, slow life below. Life that doesn’t pretend to be happy. Life that is so tiny and insignificant.

A horrific scent is beginning to waft into my face from the refrigerator. The contents are barren: ketchup, mustard, three old yogurts, and a jar of unopened pickles sit in my refrigerator, but the culprit--I determine--are the strawberries in the fruit drawer that have been left decaying for months. I used to love strawberries too. I cannot make the horrible trek to Whole Foods.

The traffic outside horrifies me now. The white noise from below has become deafening. New York City does this to me if I let it. If I become a refugee of this house it takes a lot more than a run for food to get me outside.

I miss work. As wrong as it feels to say. I miss work; work gave me something. Now I just sit in here and think. Think about the day She didn't come back. Think about the day my mother succumbed to her own body. Think about all the days my father tried to teach me to play catch with him.

The phone rings and snaps me back to the present. I'm sure it's just another telemarketer. Another person bound to their ceaseless life, simply trying to scrape along. Their calls are such an inconvenience, but sometimes they're all I have. I walk into the living room.

“Hello.” I say. They are my first words in days, and my voice is so unfamiliar. It's much deeper than it should be. I look like someone who would not have a voice like this. Yet, it is somehow smooth and inviting. A voice that fights against its owner.

“Hi, is this Mr. McCormick?”

“Yes, this is he.” People always fuck up the grammar of that phrase. I, for one, would never.

“Well, this is Alex and did you know you could save on your hotel—”

“Oh, Alex was it? I hate to say this but I don't handle my own hotel booking.” Well I guess now I do, but Alex doesn't need to know about my life. There was a moment of stunned silence before I decided to continue.

“Alex, do you enjoy what you do?” I was not trying to get a rise out of him, just genuinely curious. I always ask these callers how they feel about themselves. It's not malicious,

but they always get so defensive. After a long pause finally Alex's timid voice begins to trail out of the landline.

"Does anyone enjoy what they do?"

"I suppose to a certain extent, no. Yet, there is so much more to this world than just a job. So what is it you do?" I feel harsh. Maybe I crossed a line. Maybe I just wanted to talk. Maybe there are words that need to come pouring out of me before their weight drowns me.

The phone clicks. Even Alex is gone.

I walk into the kitchen and grab a glass from the devilish row. I reach for the mahogany bottle without thinking of the thirty days.

I have been lying awake in my bed for eleven minutes; The die is beckoning me. I found that horrible little piece of plastic for the second and current time on October eighth two thousand sixteen. It was laying on the cracked sidewalk as I was headed towards work. It was the first time I had actually walked to work in years, and somehow the die was just waiting. I sold my bike two days earlier for a paltry one hundred and thirty nine dollars. I was sick of the bike, and now I could just sell it. Nobody was here to make me late any longer.

But nobody was here at all. Just me sitting for days on end in an empty house. I suppose it's my fault for not doing my work. It's also my fault for not trying to connect with people. For always leaving a space between myself and everyone else.

I have to roll the die. I know I do. Today will be a four, there is no doubt in my mind. Every ounce of my being knows that I will be shackled to this godforsaken bed. This thought does not even frighten me. What would I be doing otherwise?

After seventeen minutes I rise. I arrive at the desk and collect the die. My hand sits still and cupped as the clock incessantly ticks. Finally my hand begins to move, I am no longer in control. The die clacks on the table. The chains come ripping out. Today there is something new. A collar rests around my throat.

“I miss talking to people.” Nobody is in the room with me, but I wanted to talk. Even though with every word the cool metallic collar on my neck grows tighter I force myself to speak. I need to end the silence.

“I think maybe I should go back to the therapist. You were the only one who knew about that, not even my father.” I’m talking to Her again. I haven’t done this in a long time. Right after She died I’d sit on the couch and talk straight ahead as if She was next to me replying. It made everything feel normal, at least for the seconds I spoke.

“My father handled his grief so effortlessly. He never seemed affected. He just kept carrying on.” I thought I could too.

“I know he stopped drinking for me. I know he hasn’t touched a drop in twenty years. That did mean a lot to me. You were right, I should call him more. He just isn’t the same as I am though. He never got me. He was always such a superman, while I was...I don’t even know. Nothing. Nobody.” The chains are beginning to strangle me now. I don’t care. If the chains killed me today, I hope not a soul would shed a tear for me. Half of me hopes this is the end. The other half is screaming to not let it be. I have gone down this road before. Whether it was the pill bottle next to my bed, or the bay window in the living room that could open just enough for my currently emaciated figure to shimmy through, I had sat staring at these exits thinking again and

again how easy everything would be if I just never woke up. How easy it would be to just be gone.

I did wake up though. The chains receded at seven P.M. but instead of moving, I just slugged some non-habit forming Z-Quil and called it a night. You know the worst thing for me right now would be to pick up an addiction to a sleep aid.

I pull my cell phone off the desk. Her frozen face is hauntingly unimpeded by any stray notifications on my lock screen. I wish we had more pictures together, because each time I see myself in this one I think I look a little bit worse. I spot a new gray hair on my thirty-seven year old head, or I see a new little fold forming under my chin. She loved this picture though. The two of us at the Eiffel Tower. Not the real one though. The Las Vegas edition. I wanted to go to the real one, but She was too lazy to renew Her passport. Every weekend She said She would and never did. So, we compromised on Las Vegas. It was the most fun I'll ever have.

Silence haunts the house. The only thing making any sound is the incessant traffic below. I want it to stop. I need it to stop. I walk around the rooms I can over and over again. The only space I haven't walked is Hers. I can't bring myself to do it. I can't step into Her world without an invitation. All the nights She spent in there working on cases that I could never grasp.

Long has Her aura left our room. Maybe it's still in there? Behind the door I do not touch. I want to go in, but I know it would break me.

My stomach grumbles violently snapping me out of my slow and ghostly walk around the apartment. I order a hearty breakfast on for delivery. I'm tired of feeling this empty. Maybe eggs will help. Besides I don't want to die hungry.

“Hello?” a raspy voice growls through the receiver. I called my father. I owed him that much--besides She would kill me if I didn’t say goodbye to him. I cannot not break my gaze with that bay window; the grey sky luring my eyes out onto the skyline.

“Who is this?” His voice grows increasingly frustrated. This frustration is the sound I grew up on. In a way it comforts me. A gentle, inviting breeze kicks in through the window.

“Listen, you better lose this number--”

“Dad. It’s Me. Lucas.” I thought I’d have more to say than that, but it’s all I have.

“Luke?” His tone was horrifyingly excited. The words just hung in between us.

“How is it back home? Everything still alright?” This felt like the normal thing to ask.

There is not really a template of things to say in a moment like this. I can’t say goodbye, not yet at least. I wish I could just tell him I love him, and I wish I could mean it.

“Yeah. Yeah. Everything’s good. I’m still puttering around. Virginia is keeping a close eye on me.” Virginia is my step-mom. She and my father married sixteen years ago, long after I’d moved to New York. The wedding was one of the few times I saw my dad happy since mom died. I’m sure he has been happy, but I would never know.

“Hey Luke. How are ya? I tried calling after Kate’s funeral, but ya never called me back. How’s work?” Kindness invigorated his voice. I forgot how kind his voice was. Two years robbed the sound of his voice from my memory.

“I actually just resigned.” This is technically true. While a foolhardy and uncalculated decision because of the lack of severance, it did mean I could tell the truth without shame.

Traffic below was louder than ever crying through the cracked window. I switched the phone from my right to my left hand, it almost slipping out of my adrenaline drenched palm.

“What? Are you retiring? Forty’s young to retire. Do you have the money for that?” He’s right. I am retiring. Not how he thinks, but I am retiring. He is wrong about something though.

“I’m forty-one actually.”

“Oh. Still young to retire. I only retired three years ago. Well I can’t blame ya. I’m sure that life out there is exhausting. When you were little I knew you were amazing with numbers, but my son on Wall Street? I never could have imagined.” There was a longing in his voice. It felt like years of words wanted to come pouring out of his mouth, yet he kept stopping himself. My gaze was still locked on that bay window and blank grey on this October day. My legs were shaking up and down, my heart pounding into my throat.

“You know, Luke.” He said after a pause.

“Yeah, Dad?” I labored to keep my tone in tact.

“I’m really proud of you.” His voice was cracking like mine yearned to do. All these years had stolen the portrait of this man. I can’t even imagine his face, but his voice was shaking me. I looked down at my bouncing pale feet. They looked so foreign now. No spontaneous beach days to keep them tinted tan.

“You know you really overcame something not many could. I wish I had said more to you then, or knew what to do. I spent night after night crying, but Lucas you really hung in there. I’m just so proud of you. You really made yourself something. You became more than I ever dreamed my son could be. Thank you.” I can feel a tear rolling down my cheek like that humid

summer day on the lake. It does not even feel like mine. It has been months since I cried what I thought was the last tear I ever could.

“I...I’m sorry,” is all I manage to stammer out before I disconnect the call and sprint over to the bay window. My mind is eerily quiet, while my body is screaming. I slip my arm out the window. My first step to taking my last. I feel so painfully numb. The grey sky is calling my name. You can make a grey sky into anything right? One step and I’m gone. So quickly. So painlessly. I want to make that grey sky into my sanctity, my salvation. I want to be gone. I need to be gone.

I can’t take that step. My body beneath me refuses to move its feet. I can’t stop hearing the ring of my father’s words. “Proud” slaps around my otherwise empty skull. He never told me he was proud before. He never showed me he cared before. I thought the only two people who truly could be proud of me were gone. I didn’t know anybody else had the capacity to care about my life. I don’t know why but I thought I would never be able to earn my father’s pride. I was never him, I could never be him. When Kate died I thought She took with her the last ounce of pride I would ever earn. Kate always wished I would talk to him, really talk to him. I was too stubborn or afraid to really try though. On death’s door I still could not build the courage to speak, but his words mean the world. Somebody is proud of me.

Kate saved my life today.

I slam the window shut and let the tears keep rolling down my cheek for an amount of time I cannot be sure of.

Word Count: 7682.