

1.

Blinding pain burst through the back of my head. I was lying flat on my back, staring up at the blurry ceiling. I instinctively rolled to my side, trying to get to my knees. My stomach heaved. Oh jeez, I was totally going to throw up.

Fantastic.

I steadied myself, my hands pressed against the gym floor to keep from falling over. My head throbbed, and black spots dotted my vision. *Keep it together.* I closed my eyes and concentrated on the feeling of dust from the floor, gritty on my sweaty fingers, until my world righted itself.

What just happened?

“Whoops, head’s up, *Jackie*. You know, most people duck when a ball comes flying at them. Might want to try that next time.”

Right... that’s what had happened.

I looked up shakily. Mike stood twenty feet away, another menacing-looking red rubber ball in his hand, poised to attack. His hot pink polo shirt was blinding. At twelve, Mike was already nearly six feet tall, with arms more muscular than most high-schoolers’. He was surrounded by five other boys, each of them egging Mike on.

After a few moments, my vision cleared completely. I got to my feet, trying to ignore the jeering boys from the other team. And the jeering boys from my team. Seriously, where was the loyalty? Man, I hated dodge-ball day in P.E. Was there really anything more tortuous than all of the jocks, armed with hard rubber balls, encouraged by authority figures like P.E. teachers to prey on the weak and defenseless? And yes, I wholeheartedly include myself in that category.

I'm a pretty self-aware guy.

I tried to rub the pain away from my skull, slowly walking back to stand in the corner of the gym. Right as I noticed my shoelace had come undone, I face planted again. Yep that's me, the uncoordinated wonder. More laughing ensued, louder this time. I shook it off, like a champ of course, and stumbled over to join the other losers who hadn't lasted two minutes into the game. Each of their faces showed varying degrees of fear or panic. Okay, okay, each of *our* faces. Our faces showed fear or panic. You got me.

"You okay, Jack?" Mason asked. "That looked like it seriously hurt. I got off easy." Mason displayed the giant red mark now covering half of his forearm. "If we're lucky, maybe Coach Smith will get bored of watching the nerd massacre and let us run laps or something."

I looked over at Coach Smith, lounging across several rows of wooden gym bleachers, my eyes narrowing. Coach had a smile on his face, and cheered encouragingly each time a particularly hard throw made contact. Yeah, he wasn't getting bored anytime soon.

Coach Smith was a bit of an anomaly. He was short and skinny, kind of like me. He had a beakish nose and thick glasses that pretty much twinned with Mason's. Not a great combo. It was almost like he had tried his entire life to fit in with the jock crowd, and now he finally got to by being a P.E. teacher and letting the jocks get away with murder. Most of the kids made fun of him behind his back, but totally sucked up to him in class. He puffed up like the Pillsbury Doughboy every time. I noticed that his hair was particularly greasy today. I turned away gagging. I'd have to get the nausea under control or else my day would get a lot worse. Like that one time in the fourth grade. Don't ask.

“Laps sound good. Man, I do not want to go back out there.” I shook my head, flabbergasted by a world where running laps was preferable to playing a game. I glanced around the gym, watching as people on the opposing teams laughed and taunted each other. Mike and his closest crony Nick were still strutting around, showing off for the girls in the class, trying to one-up each other. Red and yellow balls flew through the air, at speeds faster than any twelve-year-old had the right to generate. I imagined myself laughing with the rest of them, my aim true, arm strong. What I wouldn’t give some days just to fit in with the rest of the kids, to be normal. Instead I was the weird, scrawny one with freckles and freakish, ink black hair that was so black everyone thought I dyed it. Life would be soooooooooo much easier if I was taller or stronger or better looking. Or, you know, all three would be nice.

Mason shoved me out of my thoughts. “Dude, are you coming?” He gestured towards the door leading to the track outside. “Coach gave us the go-ahead for the laps. Johnson hooked us up!” I looked around at a few other students headed for the door. All of them were bruised and battered and looking relieved that they didn’t have to play again.

I glanced at the clock on the wall, realizing that I could either run for another twenty minutes or risk more severe injuries. A part of me wanted to stay, to prove to myself and to everyone else that I wasn’t scared. Maybe I could walk back onto the court and try not to get myself killed. Someone from my team caught a ball, allowing a player to rejoin the game. I took one step towards the court.

“Alright Jackie, coming to play again?” Mike called out from the back of the gym. He pounded the ball in his hand, a clear imitation of punching someone in the face. A wave of fear traveled

through me. What was I thinking? There was *no way* I would make it out of there alive if I tried to play again. They'd pound me into the rubbery gym floor and then laugh over my broken body. Shaking my head, I turned and followed Mason out the door and onto the field. I refused to look back. I didn't want to give them the satisfaction.

"Don't worry, one day we'll grow up to run companies or invent new computers or something, while Mike there will just end up doing door-to-door sales. Nerds rule the world, right?" Mason extended his fist, his positivity annoyingly contagious.

"Right." I bumped my fist into Mason's, and tried to smile back. I was amazed at how optimistic Mason could be, especially considering the purplish welt that was starting to form on the dark skin of his arm. Mason was slightly shorter than me, but just as lanky. He had crazy, dark brown hair that was more frizzy than curly, and wore thick black rimmed glasses over his unusual blue eyes. He smiled a toothy smile, and I noticed that Mason must have changed the color of his braces from black to neon green at his orthodontics appointment that day. Not much of an improvement.

"Alright, team, we've got laps to run. Let's get moving!" Coach Johnson blew his whistle, and took off at a slow jog down the track. Grumbling, Mason and I followed him. I liked Coach Johnson, the student teacher assigned to our class this semester. Somehow, Coach Johnson always got assigned to deal with the runts of the class, but he never picked on us like Coach Smith did, and was always encouraging.

After the first two laps, I was tired. My stupid asthma was definitely acting up. My lungs felt like a sumo wrestler was lounging on them. The sun beat down onto the field, burning my neck slowly,

rotisserie-style. Having Gym the last period of the day had seemed like a good idea during school registration, but the Kansas sun always seemed to be at its hottest during gym class. As if Coach Johnson had read my mind, I heard the whistle blow. “Let’s take a water break. It sure is hot out here.”

Johnson led us to a nearby equipment shed. We lined up at the water fountain, while Johnson spread out in the grass on the shady side of the building. “I think that’s enough for today. If it’s all the same to you, I wouldn’t mind just hanging out in the shade for the last fifteen minutes of class.” I nodded appreciatively. Everyone else looked as relieved as I felt. Let’s be honest, two laps was about all most of us could do anyway.

“Sweet,” Mason said. “Johnson is the best!” We both took our time at the drinking fountain, then ambled over to the shade with the rest of the class, sprawling out a few feet away from Coach Johnson. I studied him for a moment. He was young, early twenties for sure. He was fit, muscular, and tall. He had dark hair and dark eyes. All the girls got all swooney around him. Some guys get all the luck.

“How’s your arm, Mason?” Johnson asked, grimacing as he saw the bulging welt.

“Can’t complain. I’m sure it’ll go away in a few days.” Mason smiled, and Coach Johnson shook his head.

“What about you, Jack? How’s the head? It looked like Mike really got you there.” I felt the small bump forming at the base of my skull. A dull throbbing still pounded behind my eyes, a tiny dwarf excavating away with his giant hammer.

I didn’t want to complain, though. That would be majorly uncool. “I’ll live,” I said stoically. Coach Johnson nodded, as if that

was the best that could be expected. This was middle school, so yes, that was in fact the best that could be expected.

“You boys have big plans for the summer? I’m sure you’re both chomping at the bit to get this last week of school over with.” Mason piped up immediately. “I’m totally taking this bomb summer programing class at the college! It’s this accelerator course, and they teach you all the biggest programming languages, like C++, Java, and Python. It’s gonna be awesome!” Mason got a dreamy look in his eye, as if already seeing all of the programs and apps he would inevitably create. Totally nerding out. I rolled my eyes. Mason was a bit of a super genius when it came to computers and programming. I had told him repeatedly that he should seriously consider a career in hacking. He hadn’t agreed with me...yet.

“Wow. They actually start teaching you that stuff in the sixth grade?” Coach Johnson asked incredulously.

Mason got a sheepish look on his face. “Well, technically, the course is for high schoolers. My dad is a professor in the Information Systems Department at the college, so he got me in.”

Johnson’s eyebrows shot up. “Impressive. You must be a pretty smart kid.”

That was the understatement of the century. I was pretty smart. Like get-good-grades-read-a-lot-occasionally-watch-the-History-Channel smart. Mason was in a league all his own. He was Einstein-level smart. He could have easily skipped ahead to college and still breezed through. I had no idea why he kept slumming it in middle school. The kid was clearly messed up to willingly stay here.

Mason nodded. “Yeah, I’ve got skills.”

Johnson laughed, then turned to me. “Any big plans for you, Jack?”

I shook my head. “Not really. My dad works a lot. Just hanging out I guess.” I felt totally lame as I said it, realizing I probably sounded a bit pathetic.

“Your birthday’s next week,” Mason added helpfully. “That’s going to be sweet. Mr. Whitlock is taking us to Six Flags in St. Louis for the weekend.” I smiled. Having a birthday in June was a blessing and a curse. Dad always took Mason and me somewhere cool for a few days since school always got out the end of May, but being the youngest in my grade kinda sucked.

“Yeah, my birthday trips are pretty fun,” I admitted. “Last year we went to South Dakota to see Mount Rushmore. Mason nearly fell off a mountain and my dad had to catch him by the arm. It was awesome!”

“You mean terrifying.” Mason said, scowling. “Glad my near death experience is fodder for your entertainment!”

Coach Johnson looked at us with renewed interest. “Will this be number twelve or thirteen for you?” he asked, ignoring my Mason-almost-dying comment. Which is crazy, by the way. That anecdote is seriously some of my best stuff and is usually good for at least five minutes of mocking Mason.

“Twelve,” I said.

Coach Johnson nodded, then paused a moment before speaking. “Twelve was a pretty big birthday for me. Crazy stuff can happen when you turn twelve.”

I was about to ask what sort of crazy stuff had happened to him when he turned twelve, but he cut me off. “Well, it sounds like you’ve got great summers planned.” He looked down at his watch, then blew his whistle twice. “Alright, team, class is over. Remember, we’ve only got two class periods left. We’ll do our final

mile run next time, so make sure you bring a water bottle with you. Have a good day.”

I pushed myself off of the ground, thinking about the start of summer. I couldn’t help but catch on to Mason’s optimism. Summer meant freedom. Freedom to do what I wanted. Freedom to hang out with Mason without being bugged by other guys. Freedom from worrying about how I looked or what I could (or couldn’t) do. And who knew? Maybe this was the summer I’d been waiting for; the summer that would change my life. Maybe I’d get that growth spurt Dad swore was coming. Maybe a cute girl would move in to the empty house next door and I’d spend the whole summer showing her around. Maybe I’d find a winning lottery ticket and buy a pet tiger.

Maybe, maybe, maybe. Anything was possible.

2.

The last week of school flew by. I had one more run-in with Mike and Nick. Meaning, I accidentally stumbled in to Nick, and knocked his soda out of his hands and on to Mike. I escaped with only a few bruises, so I'm gonna call that a win. Mason and I totally rocked all of our class finals, and spent the last day of school watching movies with all of the other kids who had finished their work.

My dad picked us up from school on the last day. Dad was the opposite of me in almost every way imaginable. He was fit and tan, with a full head of thick blond hair and bright blue eyes. He always wore stylish clothes that I'd just look stupid in. In a word, Dad was cool. Not the uptight, trying too hard cool. The California beach-bum, couldn't care less cool. No lie, I envied him. How did I end up so scrawny and awkward with him as my dad? It didn't make sense! Genetic mutation. It was the only logical explanation.

Dad waved as he pulled up in his black convertible, the top already down. He pulled to a stop and popped the trunk. We threw bags filled with junk from our lockers into the trunk and got into the car.

"How was your last day?" Dad asked, checking his rear view mirror and pulling back into the road.

"Great!" Mason said. "I'm pretty sure we both aced our classes. And since we were done with our projects, we got to watch part of the first *Lord of the Rings* movie in English class. Best last day ever. I can't wait for seventh grade. We get to pick more of our classes next year. I might not even have to take P.E.!" Mason continued to rant about his class schedule. My dad listened intently

as Mason debated the merits of taking Intro to Computers or a second science course.

I'd already heard Mason debate this subject at length (like five times), so I tuned him out and let my mind wander. We drove east towards the edge of town, passing grocery stores and strip malls. We turned onto Main Street, and I glanced at the Mr. Freeze's Ice Cream Parlor. Out of nowhere, an image of my mom popped into my head, holding a dripping ice cream cone and laughing. Mom had been dead for five years, and still she seemed to surprise me in moments when I wasn't expecting it.

Marilyn Whitlock had been a small woman, short like me with the same raven black hair. On me, it looked freakish with my super pale skin, but on her, it was beautiful. She had always been quiet and reserved, but man, when she smiled.... I would have done anything to see that smile one more time.

I could still remember the night my mother died. I knew I always would. It was branded into my brain. She hadn't been there to pick me up from elementary school like she normally was. Mason's mom had waited with me for an hour in the snow, trying over and over to get Mom on her cell. Finally, she'd taken me home with Mason, and let us eat ice cream and watch TV all afternoon. It was dark when Dad had shown up, his face red and swollen.

"Where's Mom?" I had asked tiredly, nearly falling asleep as Dad lifted me up into his arms.

"She's not coming home tonight, Jack," Dad said quietly. And that was all Dad had ever said. I found out later that my mother's car had slid on some ice, right off a bridge and into the Arkansas River. Search and Rescue found her car almost immediately, upside down and filled with water. It took them

another three days to find her body, washed up on shore several miles downstream.

“...right Jack?” Mason said, thumping me on the shoulder.

“Uhh, what?” I asked stupidly, no idea what they were talking about.

“I was telling your dad about our workout plan for this summer. I read an article on the appropriate use of weightlifting in the adolescent male’s body. This way, we can lift weights safely without stunting our growth. I did a simple simulation on my computer at home, estimating the increase in calorie intake as well as time spent in the gym. Mike and Nick won’t know what’s hit them next fall.”

Probably because Mason’s punch would still be about as effective as a butterfly’s.

“True story,” I said, turning in the passenger seat to give Mason a high five. I seriously doubted that our workout plan would produce the desired effects of thirty pounds of muscle and six extra inches, but Mason was too excited for me to actually say that *out loud*. I’m not a monster.

As we drove out of Wichita, my dad turned on the radio, and we spent the next few hours jamming out to eighties rock. Dad had played the guitar back in the day, and nothing could make him smile like some old school U2. I was pretty much an expert air guitar player, so I didn’t mind the old-timer music.

We reached St. Louis just after 9:00 p.m. I had been there a few times before, mostly for my annual birthday trip. It was the biggest city I had ever visited. I looked over the darkening skyline, amazed by the seemingly millions of lights.

We parked at a hotel right across from Six Flags, a prime location for getting to the park early and staying late with the other crazies. Mason and I gathered our bags from the trunk while my dad went to check in. Ten minutes later, I finally was able to collapse on the bed, relishing the feeling of being completely stretched out. Road trips were definitely not my jam. More like my vegemite. I've heard that stuff's gross.

Within minutes, the exhaustion of the drive had worn off, and the excitement of being in a hotel room in a big city set in. We had two adjoining rooms, and Mason and I spent a few minutes chasing each other from room to room, tackling one another as hard as we could and jumping on the beds. Boys will be boys. Translation: don't try to stop us, resistance is futile.

Meanwhile, Dad ordered room service and checked his work email, mumbling to himself about various stocks and bonds. Boring mumbo jumbo that made no sense to me. Dad had worked on Wall Street as a stock trader, years before he'd met my mom. Once they'd had me, they'd moved to Kansas for the "family lifestyle" Mom had always wanted. Dad had opened a small investment firm, and Mom had done freelance writing for magazines and taken care of me full-time. Yes, it's quaint. I've been told. A lot.

The food soon arrived, and I gorged myself on French fries, slider hamburgers, and onion rings.

"This, boys, is food for men." Dad shook his head, admiring the newly uncovered buffalo wings.

"Do you think this is the reason men are more likely to have a heart attack than women?" Mason asked thoughtfully, gesturing to the enormous platter of fried food. Dad just scoffed, but I noticed

that he didn't finish off his onion rings after that. Wimp. Lucky for him I picked up the slack.

We debated watching a movie, but Mason pointed out that we had agreed to do our first workout the next morning before the park opened. I grudgingly put the TV Guide back on the desk and got ready for bed. Getting up early to work out was pretty much the last thing I felt like doing, right after *eat my own socks*, but I knew Mason wouldn't let me off the hook.

Hours later, I was still awake. I could hear my dad snoring softly through the door to the other room. Mason slept silently in the next bed over. He looked strangely like a mummy, lying perfectly flat with his arms straight down by his sides. He would be great at Light as a Feather, Stiff as a Board. You know, if we had more friends to try it out with. A ghost would *seriously* have to do some heavy lifting if we tried with just the two of us.

I glanced at the clock. *Tomorrow is finally my birthday*. I didn't know why my birthday always seemed an eternity away. Probably because everyone else I went to school with had birthdays all throughout the school year. This year though, I had awaited my birthday with barely contained excitement.

There was something about turning twelve that I had always looked forward to. Maybe it was because, at twelve, no one called you a child anymore. Maybe it was because a lot of guys started getting taller at twelve (God willing!). Maybe I just liked the number. Regardless, twelve seemed like a big deal. Dad had once told me that I'd been born at precisely 12:01 a.m. on June 1st, as if stubbornly refusing to have a May birthday. I watched the red numbers on the digital clock on the nightstand change, closer and closer to midnight. Finally, 12:01 a.m. came and went. I blew out a

sigh of satisfaction. I was officially twelve. It felt like the beginning of something big had just happened, that some switch somewhere in the universe had just been flipped. Contentedly, I drifted off to sleep. Makes sense. Old people always fall asleep instantly.

An alarm blared in my ear, beeping louder and louder. I couldn't quite get up the energy to shut it off though. My body felt like dead weight superglued to my mattress, and my eyes refused to open. Eventually, the beeping stopped, and I burrowed deeper into the sheets. I was on the verge of falling back asleep when my whole body started shaking.

"C'mon, man. Day one. Time to get up and get strong!" Mason kept shaking me, but I ignored him. I was one with my bed, and any desire to get up and work out had slid away from me sometime during the night.

Mason wouldn't give up. "Dude, you're supposed to be a morning person. Think of Mike and Nick. Think of pounding them to the ground the next time they try something. C'mon, success is all about commitment my friend." The shaking got more violent, and I finally managed to get an eye open. I moved the blanket down a few inches so I could properly glare at Mason. Mason glared right back, an angry rhino ready to charge.

"Man, I am two seconds away from grabbing that ice bucket and tossing it on you. It's a very effective technique in all the movies. Get up."

Yikes. That sounded...unpleasant. I grunted. "Fine, I'm getting up." My throat was scratchy, and my voice was deeper than usual. Cool. Maybe it would stay that way. I was twelve, after all.

"Good!" Mason nodded, his work done. "Glad to see we understand each other." Mason walked into the bathroom and shut

the door, and I heard the shower turn on. I dimly wondered why Mason would need to shower before a workout. What a waste of time. He'd just have to shower again later. Assuming we worked out hard enough to actually sweat.

I shook my head, trying to wake up the rest of the way. Finally, I rolled out of bed and staggered to the dresser where my duffle bag was. I reached my hand courageously into the mess, searching for socks and a clean shirt amidst the chaos.

There was a knock on the door, and my dad peeked his head in. "How's it going in here? Ready to go to the gym?"

I grunted a response, sitting down on the bed to put on my socks and shoes. Dad came further into the room and sat on the bed next to me, lacing up his own sneakers.

"Happy birthday, kid," he said, nudging his shoulder into mine. "How does it feel to be twelve?"

"Tiring," I responded with a yawn. I heard off-key singing from the bathroom. "Mason is insane."

Dad laughed. "I think 'dedicated' is a more appropriate term. Don't worry, I'm sure his enthusiasm will wear off in a few weeks and you'll be off the hook for all of these early morning workouts."

"I freaking hope so. I feel dead right now. Even my muscles know that I shouldn't be up this early. They're rebelling! This can't be healthy."

"You sure you're just tired?" Dad asked, real concern showing on his face. He put his hand up to my forehead. "You feel a little warm. I'll tell Mason you're sick if you want to go back to bed."

I shook away from my dad, standing up and bending over to stretch out my aching back. "Nah, I'm fine. I just had trouble falling

asleep. I'm sure once we get going my body will remember it's supposed to be able to, you know, move and stuff."

"Ok, suit yourself." Dad stood up and began stretching as well. "Seriously, though, you'll tell me if you start to not feel good, right?" Dad's voice was casual, but it seemed forced. His eyes searched me intently, as if expecting me to faint any second. Jeez, overprotective much?

"Chillaxinate yourself, Dad. I haven't been sick in ages!"

"Fine, fine. It would just be terrible if you got sick on your birthday trip, that's all. I'll leave you alone."

I was about to respond when the bathroom door opened with a bang. Mason jumped out of the bathroom, music blaring to life.

"Y'all ready for this?" Mason sang along, dancing awkwardly to the 90s music playing on his phone. His Running Man looked more like a panda doing air-pushups, but points for effort. "I got us some warm up tunes. Let's do this!"

Dad laughed, and I noticed that the concern I had seen on his face a moment ago seemed to have vanished. I grabbed my stuff and followed Mason out the door. I looked back, and Dad was still watching me. He looked sheepish, like I'd caught him doing something he wasn't supposed to be doing.

"Come on, Dad!" I said impatiently, and he followed us out the door.

That afternoon, I stood in line with Mason at Six Flags, waiting to ride the Boomerang. The heat pressed down on us, and I was covered in sweat. I mean, I was glistening in a very attractive manner. I looked ahead in the line, where the shade of the ride's awning was a mere fifteen feet away.

“Dude, that’s a bummer about your dad,” Mason said sympathetically. “I didn’t realize he got motion sickness so easily.” We had been riding the Xcalibur, spinning in endless circles, when Dad started looking green. By the time the ride was over, Dad stumbled off to find a bathroom, holding his hand over his mouth.

“Well, the two corndogs and the funnel cake right before the ride probably didn’t help,” I countered. I felt bad for my dad, since we had driven all the way from Wichita, but everyone knows massive amounts of park food and spinning rides are a bad combination. I very responsibly had stopped at one corndog, and even I still felt just a little queasy. Plus, I was getting tired of all of the women gazing longingly at my Dad each time we waited in line. That was nauseating too in its own disgusting way. This wasn’t an uncommon occurrence. Even I had to admit that Dad was a pretty good looking guy with his movie star smile, wavy hair, and tall, muscular frame. It seemed like every woman age twenty to eighty would stare at Dad with dreamy eyes and drool just a little bit. Talk about embarrassing. For them, I mean. Have some dignity, women!

“Do you think he’ll be ok? Should we go find him?”

“Nah, I’ve got my cell phone on, and I know he has his. He’d probably prefer to puke in peace and meet up with us later anyway. Tomorrow, he’ll make smarter food choices.”

The line slowly moved forward, putting us five feet closer to shade. Mason’s phone beeped, and within seconds he was shaking his head.

“What’s up?” I asked. Mason didn’t respond for a few more seconds, apparently finishing whatever he was reading first.

“Coach Johnson isn’t coming back next year. I guess the school offered him a full-time job, but he turned them down and took off.”

“Makes sense,” I shrugged. “Who would wanna work with Coach Smith? I’d move to freaking Alaska to get away from that guy.” Mason nodded in agreement.

“Too bad.” Mason said. “Wells Middle School could’ve used a good teacher. Most of them just worship the jocks.”

“How did you find out about Johnson?” I asked, curious. Mason’s face burned red with embarrassment, and I understood instantly. “Seriously? You’re still reading Lindy Meyer’s blog? Even for us, that’s a bit pathetic.”

Lindy was the school’s resident gossiping hag, blogging about every interesting thing happening at the school. Her dad was on the school board, so Lindy always got the scoop on teacher drama too. She also had epically turned Mason down when he’d asked her to go to the movies two months ago, laughing in his face. To rub salt in the wound, she’d live-tweeted the whole experience second by second so her followers could get a first-hand account of Mason’s utter embarrassment.

“I can’t help it. She’s too beautiful! I could just listen to her insult me all day.” Mason shook his head, and I could see the longing in his expression. I just didn’t get it. Lindy wasn’t even that pretty. Definitely not pretty enough to willingly take that kind of humiliation.

The line moved forward again, and we were finally, mercifully under the awning. I waited a moment for my eyes to adjust to the sudden darkness of the shade, but something wasn’t right. My vision suddenly tunneled, and then went black. I swayed on the spot, grabbing onto the handrail that separated the lines. I couldn’t see or hear anything. Which, by the way, is freaking

terrifying! Was I dying? Was the world ending? Had I been drugged? WHAT WAS HAPPENING TO ME?

Moments later, my vision started coming back. I breathed a sigh of relief. Ok, not dying. Maybe just heat stroke. As my vision cleared, I realized something was still off. The color was washed from the world, everything varying shades of black and white. There was still complete silence. This was definitely not normal.

“Mason?” I called for help, but no sound came out. Mason stared straight ahead, like I was invisible to him. No one in line seemed to notice my silent yells. The world was empty of noise. I tried to reach for Mason, but I had no control over my body. I felt like I was watching a silent movie, simply the eyes in a body I didn’t control. Suddenly Mason and I were moving, heading up the line towards the roller coaster. Seconds passed, or maybe minutes. I couldn’t keep track of time in this twilight world. Soon, we were climbing into the car on the front of the ride, securing the harnesses and pulling the headrests over our shoulders.

I tried to stop, to get off of the roller coaster, but I still had no control. Mason seemed oblivious to me, his face alight with excitement. We took off down the track. I caught every minute detail as we twirled and looped through the ride. It made the ride seem much slower than a normal roller coaster. As we approached a curve, I felt my body jar in the wrong direction. Panic surged through me as our car didn’t turn. Instead, we continued straight and soared off the track.

I tried to yell, but still my world was silent. I watched the ground come towards me. I wanted desperately to close my eyes before impact came, but instead I watched as we crashed into a group of bushes. I expected immense pain, but I felt nothing. I

finally seemed to regain some control of my body. Twisting and turning beneath the shoulder enclosure at such a slow speed felt like torture, but I finally found Mason's eyes. They were open wide, but there was no life in them. There was screaming in my head, and I strained at the harness holding me back. I couldn't get to him.

It was too late.

He was gone.

My vision began blurring again, turning to blackness. Something new was happening.

I heard Mason's voice, slowly growing louder in the darkness. "I'm thinking if our whole workout plan goes right, she might actually give me a shot next year. You know, a nerd to ruler of the school sort of thing. Very teen movie."

My sight came back in a rush. I blinked, and realized I was standing back at the very beginning of the awning, still twenty or thirty minutes from the ride. The world blared to life, the sound and color almost overwhelming.

"What the heck was that?" I asked Mason, rubbing my eyes briskly.

"What was what?" He looked around, trying to figure out what I was talking about.

"You're ok!" Man, I had never been so relieved in my life. I was weak with it.

"That's what I'm saying! I'm totally ok. You don't have to worry about my unhealthy obsession with Lindy. I've got it under control."

I studied the crowd. Everything seemed normal, like the last few minutes hadn't happened. What on earth had I just seen?

“Nothing. It’s... never mind.” I felt weak, and realized I was still gripping onto the handrail, the metal cool in my palm.

“Dude, you ok? You don’t look so great.”

I shook my head, trying to make sense of everything. I needed to sit down. My head felt foggy. Maybe I was dehydrated. That could cause hallucinations, right? I waited for the weakness to pass, for my brain to fill in the answers I was missing. Nothing came though, and my weakness grew worse.

“Hey Mason, I think I need to go chill out for a bit. You can stay here if you want, but I need to find a bench or something.” I stumbled out of line, heading for an out of the way bench I’d seen earlier with plenty of shade.

“Dude, did the corn dog finally catch up to you as well?” Mason trailed behind me, continuing with the lecture. “We need to establish some ground rules for tomorrow if you and your dad actually want to make it on more than two rides. Amateurs.”