Sean Prentiss

SLOWCORAZON

Her name is Jasita Louisa Maria Slowcorazon. We call her Jessie. She stands five-foot-three-inches tall and weighs two hundred and fifteen pounds. A double chin cascades from her square jaw and cellulite-pockmarked flesh flows from her hips down her legs. Lakota black hair hangs shoulder-length, and her skin resembles caramel. Three days ago, May 24, 2001, Jessie turned sixteen. We celebrated with store-bought cake at Mountainview Center for Troubled Youth, where Jessie has lived for the last thirteen months.

Mountainview, in southwestern Colorado, shelters Jessie and four other teens (Katie, Donna, Sarah, and Brit) and provides me with a job as assistant counselor. Katie and Donna and Sarah and Brit share bedrooms. Jessie, though, we segregate in a room of her own so she can no longer chase roommates out with bursts of violence. Before Jessie had her own room, I often heard Brit scream and moan. I'd sprint down the hall and find Jessie straddling Brit, pulling her hair. Other times Jessie punched Donna after lights out. At night, Jessie kissed Sarah's neck, leaving hickies like lilac stains.

This youth home, where these five girls live has a bent basketball hoop teetering above the driveway, its net long ago torn away. An eight-foot chain-link fence surrounds the yard, and a wooden porch needs paint. Inside, two couches face a dusty TV, and a large table overfills the dining room. There, a glass door overlooks the drought-stricken Rio Animas de las Perdidas, "the river of lost souls," and beyond that hills then mountains that have been on fire for the last month.

Though Mountianview looks normal, lingering on the edge of this ordinary tourist town, no parents live here. Instead, three offices occupy former bedrooms—for the executive director, the therapist, and the six counselors. A concrete-walled room with massive shelves and two refrigerators stores frozen bread, generic cereal, soft tomatoes, margarine tubs, and gallon containers of canola oil. Three bedrooms in the north hallway house the five girls. Each room holds two particleboard dressers and two beds covered in mismatched sheets. Broken Venetian blinds jacket locked windows. One closet contains the few possessions each girl carries here.

And if this were a normal house, everyone would go to bed before midnight. But supervising staff members, like me, stay awake around the clock, and every door and window is wired to an ITG hardcable alarm. During shift changes, other counselors and I test the security system.

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ins.

Here, Jessie, Katie, Donna, Sarah, and Brit wake, eat, pout, shower, talk, and fight to a regimented schedule in hopes that the staff can rehabilitate the girls from heavy drug use, violence, and pathological disorders. Once reformed, we return the girls to parents (who often abuse drugs), foster parents (who sometimes mistreat them), and social service agencies (that rarely offer services).

* * *

By June 1, Jessie has resided at Mountainview for thirteen months, seven months longer than any other resident, six months longer than I have been an assistant counselor, and four months longer than a resident is supposed to remain at Mountainview. Most counselors believe Jessie self-destructs because she considers Mountainview the closest thing to home. Once she graduates, Jessie will become an emancipated minor with no family to return to and no friends to take her in.

At twenty-nine, I consider this job a paycheck, with the bonus of being able to work with at-risk youth, a passion of mine. I've worked with two hundred youth on adventure trips and on trail crews. And though I love working at Mountainview, I've applied to college master's programs, and I have no intentions of remaining. Then again, neither do Katie, Donna, Sarah, or Brit. They hope to graduate in a few months. Only Jessie seems to want to stay.

* * *

During the last thirteen months, Tonya, our in-house therapist, has diagnosed Jessie as a "manic-depressive," a "borderline schizophrenic," and a "pathological liar." Also, Jessie has "attention deficit disorder" and displays signs of fetal alcohol syndrome.

By doctor's orders and Tonya's recommendations, Jessie consumes prescription pills in the morning and at night to calm fears, obsessions, and violences. Unfortunately, Zyprexa, Novo-Alprazol, and Ritalin only offer a temporary dampening of emotions rather than a permanent suppression. At dawn Jessie swallows her drugs and stumbles into a glazed eye stupor, which leaves her sitting on the couch staring at the tan walls. By mid-morning she arcs toward a giddy happiness once the Novo-Alprazol and Ritalin kick in. She makes bad jokes and laughs too loudly. Around lunch Jessie grows angry as the medicine dissipates. Jessie slams her hands on the kitchen table when she asks for a snack but isn't allowed one. As she tries, but fails, to deal with this chemical cycle, she cries tears of pain and hurt and sadness and shame from a history of wretchedness and despair. After dinner Jessie circles back into a stupor once staff members feed her more Zyprexa, Novo-Alprazol, and Ritalin.

Since I am an assistant counselor, I cannot distribute meds. Instead, I observe Jessie's cycle forty hours a week for ten dollars and sixteen cents an hour, eighty-one dollars and twenty-eight cents a shift. I never work overtime.

* * *

Two days a week I work the graveyard from 11 p.m. until 7 a.m. During the dark hours, I clean house and check that the residents remain sleeping. While patrolling during the overnight I look through the dining room's glass door at the Missionary Ridge Wildfire, which began a month ago, and now burns seventy-five thousand acres of tinder dry San Juan National Forest. The fire began when a car muffler threw a spark into rabbit grass. At 3:27 in the morning the early June sky resembles smeared charcoal, the flames wane until dawn, and the smell of smoke dissipates on a westerly breeze. I breathe deeply, though an aroma of chlorine pervades the kitchen. I've already bleached the linoleum, vacuumed, washed three loads of laundry, prepped food for tonight's dinner, and organized paperwork. Between doing all that, every fifteen minutes I groggily stand and sneak through silence down the hallway to peer into the three bedrooms. I ensure that no one tries to run away, start a fight, do drugs, or have sex. I carry a flashlight but leave it off until I stand in the residents' doors, which always stay open. In a doorway, I cover the bulb with my palm, obscuring the beam so as to not wake the girls, but also so they do not see me coming. Only when I stand in on the threshold of their rooms do I shine the thinnest slivers of eggshell-white light across the sleeping residents. Tonight, Katie, Donna, Sarah, Brit, and Jessie toss and turn.

Shuffling back to the kitchen, I grab Jessie's bulky black file from the lock cabinet and return to the dining table. I set down the two 10 x 13-inch three-ring binders and push away a green bean left lying on the table from tonight's dinner when the five girls and I ate together as a make-believe family. Sixteen-year-old Katie, who cooked store-bought pot pie and

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beans, spoke loudly and laughed at her own jokes as she placed slices on each resident's plate. Donna, mentally challenged, gazed out the glass door toward the lingering soot in the air and the Animas River fifty yards away. Sarah, skinny with long brown hair, as usual, refused food. Hunched over, she played with her fingers. Thirteen-year-old Brit chatted about a new boyfriend and his long, black hair that she loved to touch. Jessie devoured a slice of pot pie, another, and then a third, until I removed the dish before she could eat the remaining slices.

Jessie's binders sprawl across the table—inside her history, therapist recommendations, court reports, staff comments, and doctors' notes pack these worn pages. I read about three-year-old Jessie placed in temporary custody with the South Dakota Department of Social Services, her mother jailed after a fourth drunk driving conviction. A year later, Jessie was removed again from home after Social Services discovered the family had no food for three weeks. I cannot help imagining Jessie as an emaciated girl with a blue dress hanging off razor shoulders.

I rub my hands through my short, unkempt hair, massage my neck. When Jessie was six, her mom was admitted to a South Dakota hospital, where she died two weeks later. The death certificate says the cause was long-term alcohol poisoning. As darkness settles and dawn waits on the other side of the fiery San Juan Mountains, I try not to think of Jessie setting her photo album on this kitchen table last Tuesday. "See this picture, Sean? This is PHS Indian Hospital. They brought me from school to say goodbye to Mom the day she died." Jessie's fingers then point to another photo, "Those are my brothers and sisters." I see five total, and not one child looks at the camera. "I haven't seen any of 'em since. Though I did talk to this one, Richard, the other day." At Mountainview, Jessie has no phone access. I do not call her, this time, on the fib. It is just a white lie.

I flip to Jessie's court record. An appearance for drug possession. Another for sexual assault of a boy at the alternative high school. One for attempted arson of a shed. Another for selling drugs on school property. Two physical assaults. For these offenses, she spent a year at a nearby juvenile lock-down facility. Once she was released, thirteen months ago, the courts assigned Jessie here.

I walk down the hall to check on the girls. A deep and sad silence lingers in the rough spackled walls as my feet brush through the tan carpet. I know this hallway by heart, so I walk in darkness. Into Jessie's room I shine the thinnest beam of light. She has thrown off her blankets. I want to pick up her tossed bedspread and cover her body, tuck the blanket beneath her feet and around her shoulders. I want to rub her forehead when she has a nightmare. I don't. I won't enter Jessie's room without another counselor present because Jessie compulsively lies. I'm afraid she'll say I acted inappropriately. I remove the light from her purple pajamas and return to the kitchen.

At six, Jessie left the Dakotas with an aunt and uncle for southwestern Colorado. Social Services suspected these relatives of physically and sexually abusing Jessie. Before anything could be confirmed, the aunt and uncle were arrested for methamphetamine manufacturing. They skipped bail, abandoning Jessie in Colorado. As I close my eyes in exhaustion, I envision Jessie at eight. She has put on weight from eating junk food in place of traditional meals. She sits alone in a house that reeks of chemicals. Its walls will be torn down, its stained yellow linoleum ripped up, but the smell of cooked methamphetamines can never be wiped clean.

The file tells me that since then, Jessie has lived with foster families, in lock-down facilities, and at group homes, and I wonder if any of them reminded Jessie of Indian boarding schools where Native Americans, like Jessie's mom and dad, lost their hair and their language. And Jessie survived on the streets for six months. One hundred days ago she ran from here to a pedophile's house for a weekend of drinking and drug use. I don't know what else may have occurred in that asshole's trailer, and I don't want to unless it means the pedophile will be punished even more than Jessie has been. Jessie refuses to tell us anything about the weekend.

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Jessie has been molested by at least two men besides her uncle and this most recent pedophile. She had what she considers consensual sex at thirteen. She attempted suicide at twelve, fourteen, and fifteen by slitting her wrists. I have counted the scars that arc across her skin.

I stand from the table as a fatigue smolders within me. The distant flames from the Missionary Ridge burn low to the ground. Around noon, they will erupt into two-hundred-foot flames of ninety-degree summer days that swallow the tops of old growth ponderosas.

I think about Jessie's file, this secret past, and I know that I don't want the burden that comes along with knowing her history, but I need to read her record for my job. Sweat beads on my forehead. Everything in these 10 x 13-inch three-ring notebooks must remain confidential. I can't share these findings with anyone, not even my girlfriend of three years who asks each morning when I get done with a graveyard, "How was your shift?" I force a smile and lie, "All right," as I climb into bed. Aly tucks me in before she goes to her job as a barista. And when I write about the five girls three years later, I will change their names, the names of the

counselors, the name of the facility, and I will refuse to name the town. Just doing that will keep me from being able to share the true story with anyone, ever.

After reading one nightmare after another, I think about what these reams of paper don't record. There exists no reference to Jessie being stuck here in Southwest Colorado with no chance to escape. No one insinuates that Jessie has been cut from her culture and the medicine her society might have used to try and heal her. No one mentions that there is no Lakota sweat lodge for Jessie to use to gain strength. Nowhere in her file does it mention the conversation Jessie and I had a week ago.

"Did you hear about the powwow at the college?" Jessie asked while she and I sat on the back porch.

"Yeah," I said as I looked at the drought-stricken Animas River.

"I want to go."

"Let's talk to Tonya. If she says okay, I'll take you if I'm working."

"Did you know I used to Fancydance?"

"Up in South Dakota?" An ashen haze covered the sun, and a massive plume of smoke rose thirty thousand feet into the air above Missionary Ridge.

"Yeah, and I had my regalia down here. But it got lost after leaving one of my foster homes. It was beautiful."

In sixteen years of living, no one ever recorded when Jessie was last hugged or last went to a Sun Dance with family. There is no mention of Jessie smiling or laughing or of anyone saying "I love you" to her. I have never considered uttering those words myself.

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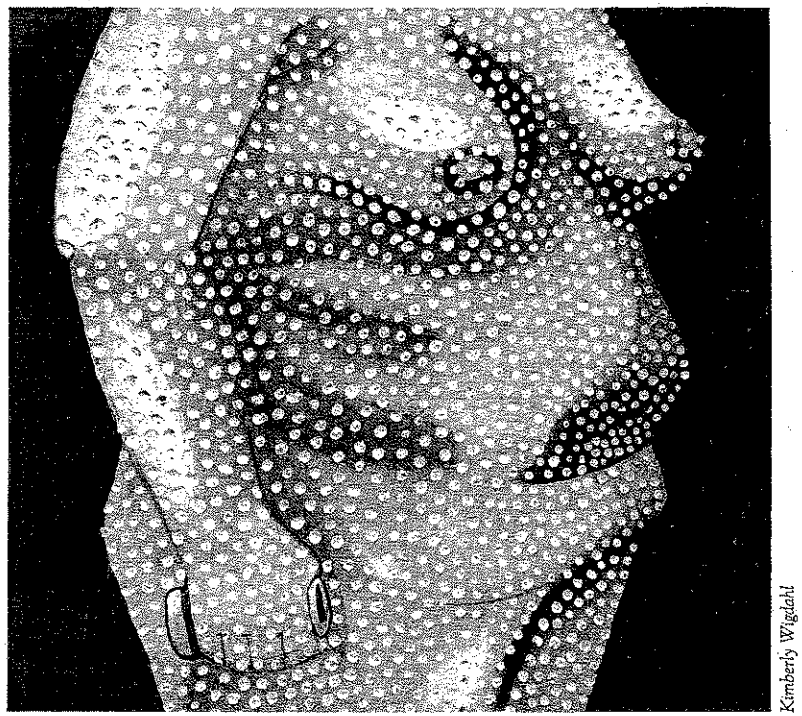
I set my head on the table, unable to keep my eyes open. Weariness overwhelms me. Jessie may be the first non-redeemable youth I have ever worked with. I have never seen such layerings of pain, so much against one person—no mother, father, immediate or extended family, a long history of mental illness, and abuse by those who were supposed to protect her. Is there any way Jessie can shed her history? I search for saving qualities within her or for people, including me, who can assist Jessie and her burdening history. With closed eyes, I see black.

* * *



Kimberly Wigdahl

"Hey, Sean, I just ate these,"
she says holding a white bottle of Tylenol.

On June 3, Mountainview erupts. I've already dialed nine-one-one, but the blue and red police sirens won't arrive for minutes. I stand in the center of the kitchen and keep an enraged Jessie separate from the other girls. From what I understand, Donna borrowed Jessie's maroon hairbrush without asking. Jessie screams, "I'll fucking kill you, Donna. I'll kill you." Jessie's eyes blister crimson. Donna yanks her curly blonde hair, hits herself in the face, and yowls through her open mouth, stained with yellow mustard.

"We're in lockdown," I yell. "Get to your rooms." Outside, a long, drawn-out siren wails as a fire truck races to a blow-up on Missionary Ridge. I listen for the sound of the police but hear only Katie screaming at Jessie, "You're fuckin' crazy." The gold linoleum shakes under the weight of Katie's steps as she storms from the kitchen.

I try to look calm, but I stand with my legs wide in case Jessie charges me. To my back, Sarah whimpers in the corner. Her thin legs folded against her chest, she hugs them with her arms. The black hood on her sweatshirt covers her eyes. Brit throws her arms up and down as she

ll think, Jessie is a danger to self and others. It is good she arrested. I won't believe it.

bellows, "Shut up, shut up, shut up, shut up!"

And Jessie, weighing one tenth of a ton, stands corpulent in the center of the kitchen. Her scream, accented from growing up in Pine Ridge, South Dakota, a land of stolen voices, fills the house. Every time I step close to Jessie to calm her, her arms flail, a skill learned from the relatives who transported her from the Dakotas to Colorado and taught discipline with fists. Jessie bawls, "Donna, get over here so I can beat your ass, you cocksucker." Jessie learned these words of hate in the six foster homes she lived in and then was kicked out of after she was deemed "unruly," "highly psychopathic," and a "sexual perpetrator" by child abusers and by upstanding Christian families who strived to heal Jessie with love but, instead, severed Jessie from her culture's religion. Jessie sobs, "If anyone gets near me, I'll fucking kill you and then kill me. Give me a knife." Her eyes dart around the kitchen. All the knives remain locked in a wood cabinet.

Ash from the fire falls on Mountainview's scorched lawn, and the Animas de las Perdidas runs low from three months of no rain. The house reeks of burnt timber. Dull sunshine rays through the windows and casts long shadows across the floor. A lone raven caws and caws from a power line just outside. I want to sit beneath the cables and stare at the raven's blue pinion feathers while I listen to it sing. Instead, I remain inside and create a 5' 6", 138-pound barrier between Jessie and the other residents. I swallow sooty air and try to calm myself because I don't want Jessie to see my hands shaking with fear, anger, and sadness.

Though I tell myself not to do anything stupid as we wait for the swirl of blue, red, blue, red to pull into the driveway, I want to charge Jessie and wrap my arms around her fleshy torso. I want to squeeze so hard that my biceps sink into her fatty rolls. I want to squeeze until I feel Jessie's bones—her spine, her ribs. Squeeze until she and I both feel safe. Until she can be a child again. A girl. A regular adolescent with usual problems. I want to bear-hug Jessie until she cries. I want to swallow her in my arms until her chest heaves. I want to stroke her hair as she cries because only then will I know she heals. But I can't even place a hand on her shoulder. Mountainview policy, as dictated by Social Services, states that counselors can't touch a resident, even to hug. Social Services believes that the residents have been abused enough by embraces and kisses, and Social Services worries about molestations and false accusations.

Instead, I wait for the sound of sirens to echo through the kitchen, which means the police will soon enter this house, setting off the alarm. The police will corner Jessie between the wall and the stove. She will rain punches on them like someone scared to death of help. A cop will slip behind Jessie and twist her arm until the pain in her shoulder makes her discharge a guttural scream. I will cover my ears and will try, but fail, to avert my eyes. The police will slap silver handcuffs around Jessie's scarred wrists. I will think, *Jessie is a danger to herself and others. It is good she was arrested.* I won't believe it.

The cops will transport Jessie to Four Corners Mental Health Clinic; she will be evaluated to determine if she is suicidal. By then, Jessie will have fallen into a stupor. After a forty-five minute interview, a suicide therapist will call Mountainview and say, "Jessie doesn't appear to be at risk. She can go home."

I will think but won't say, *the same shit will happen, and you evaluators won't see it. You won't see her scarlet rage from a mother lost, a father run away, relatives who taught hate and addiction, foster homes that provided nothing beyond basic needs, and a residential youth home that offers only discipline and prescription pills.*

Tonight, after work, I will go to Storyville Bar on 9th and Main. The bartender, Ryan, will walk over to me and lean his elbows on the bar. "So, Sean, how were the girls tonight?"

"Fine," I'll say, and though I'll want to tell him stories so that they can be released from me and born into the world, I will be unable to. Instead I will just repeat, "Fine."

Then, since I will not have anything more to say, he'll ask, "The usual?"

I'll nod and keep my hands in my lap because they will still be shaking. Ryan will bring me a pint of Pabst, and I will drink until tonight recedes from my mind, until my heart yields.

* * *

Six weeks later, on a lazy Sunday morning, Jessie walks through Mountainview in an azure state of bliss. A bundle of purple grapes dangles from her hand as she lumbers to the couch beside me. She tosses two grapes in her mouth and says in a chirpy voice, "Hey, Sean, what happens if you eat lots of Tylenol?" Jessie regularly asks morbid questions like, "How long does it take to die by hanging?" "How much blood do you need to lose to kill yourself?" or "What do you think it

A bundle of purple grapes dang from her hand as she lumbers t the couch beside me.

feels like if you jump off a cliff?" I answer Jessie as I always do, "I don't know, but let's not find out, okay?"

"Okay," she smirks.

"Why don't we do chores rather than think about stuff like this," I say, and then I stand and begin my Sunday task of sanitizing the kitchen counters. The residents do their chores as well. Katie, on hands and knees, scrubs around the base of the toilet; Sarah mops the linoleum floors. Brit folds laundry, putting sheets in one pile, thongs and bras into another, and jeans and shirts into a third. Donna dusts the living room while Jessie washes dishes. The house stays calm and smells of disinfectant and smoldering ponderosas. Jessie shows no mood swings—no stupor, anger, rage, or tears. There wafts merely contentment. Jessie is sedate, and I am happy. For this moment, Jessie demands nothing more than benign neglect.

After Jessie has finished her chore, she again sprawls across the tan, torn cushions, which sag beneath her weight. "Hey, Sean, I just ate these," she says holding a white bottle of Tylenol. She shakes it. The bottle rattles silence.

"Are you serious?" I ask. Sarah glances up from her chore, looking for me to confirm if this is another Jessie lie, or a suicide attempt. I nod my head, letting Sarah know that everything is under control. Jessie smiles a grin of floating happiness. *She is serious*, I think. I also think, *She is a pathological liar*. I take a breath and say, "Hey Jessie, why don't we go for a ride."

"Where to?"

"Mercy Hospital."

"I'm just kidding. I didn't take any."

I can pretend that Jessie didn't gobble the pills. I can let Jessie try to kill herself. I push these thoughts from my mind and phone the on-call counselor. In five minutes, Laura arrives to watch the girls, and I say, "Let's go for a ride, Jessie."

Jessie sits up slowly, "Okay."

* * *

At the hospital, the doctor feeds Jessie a slurry of charcoal to absorb the poison pills and then gives Jessie a bucket to throw up in, but instead Jessie vomits a tan-gray puke across milky floors and walls. Nurses pull on latex gloves. They count eighty-three white tablets of Tylenol. Each pill a coin tossed into water.

The doctor pulls me aside and places his hand on my shoulder, "Jessie's at risk of liver failure." *Just like her mother*, I think. "That amount of Tylenol would have killed her. If her liver doesn't fail then you've saved her life." I feel nothing like a hero.

I call Four Corners Mental Health, and a suicide specialist comes to interview Jessie. I do not hear the conversation, only what the specialist shares with me, which is the same bullshit that Jessie makes people believe when she is in her prescription-drug-induced state. "Jessie is no longer a suicide risk. She can return to Mountainview. Just have her talk to Tonya." The therapist continues, "Jessie should be fine. She told me that she was just trying to get attention."

"Does your file show that Jessie is a pathological liar?" I remove my glasses and rub my palm across my eyes.

"Yes, and I understand your point, but I doubt she's lying this time. What she needs is more therapeutic focus from Mountainview."

I can't help but think that the mental health system, whether suicide therapists or Mountainview, will never heal Jessie. I don't know if it is because they refuse to or because they do not know how. I try not to blame them, because I fail Jessie daily. My cheeks flush scarlet, and my jaw clenches. I turn from the specialist before saying anything I will regret.

I leave Jessie at the hospital for a few days of observation and drive toward Mountainview. Dark, flat bottomed clouds have replaced the blue sky, and a light rain begins to streak the windshield. This tan desert town needs moisture. So much of the forest beside town has already been scorched this summer. The scrub trees—pinyon, juniper, and gambel oak—stand as charred sticks. The burnt ponderosas reach into the sky like dead arms held out to heaven.

The burnt ponderosas reach in the sky like dead arms held ou heaven.

The drizzle, our first precipitation in three months, patters the windshield like pills rattling inside a bottle. The rain strengthens and the wipers *thunk* back and forth as the flames in the mountains succumb to the force of falling water. What would I do if I were Jessie? I think and think and honestly do not know. At a stoplight, I close my eyes and see emptiness. I cannot imagine Jessie's life or even empathize. The closest I get is to realize that Jessie drowns in a torrent of hurt and reacts with force and emotion, so as to maintain some control.

I return to Mountainview, park the van, and continue work. I finish the forty-hour week and look forward to a needed two days off. Tonight I will go to Storyville and again I won't say a thing to Ryan when he serves me a Pabst.

The following Tuesday, Jessie returns from the hospital. She does not need a liver transplant, and again she gobbles Zyprexa, Novo-

Alprazol, and Ritalin, abides by Mountainview's rigid schedule, and again she arcs like hot ashes thrown from a fire.

* * *

In the quiet of a July night I sit in the dining room and breathe in cool, clear air brought in by a breeze. I stare at my thin personal journal that sits on the table. With five hours of free time until my shift ends at seven, I decide to write. I want to attempt an exercise that our therapist asks the residents to try. Tonya tells the girls, "I want you to journal about what you shouldn't write, that which you don't want to bring to words."

I roll this idea around in my head. The exercise seems wispy like smoke. I open the journal and scribble in the date. Is it past midnight? Yes, so it is July 7. Jessie came home yesterday from the hospital.

I begin to write, then stop and simply remember. I arrived to work at eleven, and Jessie should have been asleep. Instead, she sat at the kitchen table and spoke with Laura, who worked the three to eleven shift. Jessie slumped against the table, tilting it slightly, her arms tossed across the wood. I was about to say "Good evening," when I saw Jessie's shoulders heave from breathing, from crying.

"You don't know, you don't know," Jessie said.

"What don't I know?" asked Laura, who motioned for me to stay.

Jessie raised her head from the table and spread her arms wide, "Anything. It just burns."

"What?" Laura asked.

"Life. I'm sick of it." Jessie lowered her head to the table and slowly bounced her skull against the soft wood. A *thunk* resonated through the kitchen. I moved toward Jessie; my arm outstretched to touch, to gently rub her hiccupping back. Before my fingers felt her crimson sweatshirt, I stopped, remembering. My body grew hot. "I'm sorry, Jessie."

Laura added, "So am I."

I knew our words were pitiful. But what do you say to someone as hurt as Jessie?

"Yeah, well, I gotta go to bed," Jessie mumbled. She stood from the amethyst plastic chair with her face stained with tears that she refused to wipe away. She slapped and slapped her palms against the sheetrock walls as she walked down the dark hall.

What do I write tonight? I write that I am tired of staying awake through the middle of the night while even flames sleep. I am weary of shining the slenderest light onto Jessie and then watching her struggle to sleep. I am exhausted from seeing Jessie's hurt boil while I am only able to say, "I am sorry." I write that I have no answers for Jessie, that I think she might deserve death. Not like some believe a murderer deserves death but like the groundhog, paralyzed many years ago by my station wagon tire, deserved to die. The groundhog warranted death not because the pain was its fault, but because the pain was a burden the groundhog could never lose.

I stopped the station wagon and saw the groundhog prone in the road. Its mate, standing beside its injured partner, hissed as my friend, Jason, and I stepped from the station wagon. The wounded groundhog remained still. Expectant.

"What should we do?" I asked.

"I don't know."

"Use the hockey stick in my car."

Jason looked at me, and I just tilted my head toward the rear of the station wagon. He pulled the wooden hockey stick out and walked toward the exposed body. The uninjured groundhog ran to the shoulder, then turned to watch.

Jason stared at the pines until I whispered, "You've got to."

Jason didn't ask why he was the one with the stick. I hope he knew he was stronger. That I could not swing the stick. A sick look smoldered across Jason's face. I wanted to close my eyes, to see blackness, but instead I stared. Jason arced the wooden shaft down. The blade slashed into the groundhog, causing it to shriek. Again, again, again, Jason brought the stick down, until the groundhog ceased screeching.

I write what I should not. I write that I want the pain removed from Jessie's life.

* * *

Four days later my boss, Cheryl, calls me to her office. I wonder what I've done wrong. Cheryl sits at her desk; her German shepherd lies beside my chair. I pet the dog as it shows its belly for me to rub.

"Sean, as you know, Ben is leaving Mountainview. I want you to take his job. I want to make you a lead counselor."

I think about earning twenty-seven thousand dollars a year and getting full medical insurance, and the offer sounds good. I contemplate the commitment and the burden the promotion entails. I reflect on my responsibility to help Jessie and the other four. I imagine nights protecting the residents from Jessie's rage. I think of dialing nine-one-one. I envision suicide attempts, and I wonder how I will respond. Maybe I will pretend I do not hear Jessie tell me that she ate Tylenol. Maybe I will think that she is just telling white lies. I understand the magnitude of my responsibility.

"Thanks. Wow." Cheryl smiles. "But I can't take the job. I hate to do this to you, but actually, I think I need to quit."

Cheryl rubs her hand through her short blonde hair and takes off her glasses. "I understand."

* * *

Two weeks later, on my final day at Mountainview, I work with a sense of detachment. In four hours I will leave this youth home forever. Due to confidentiality issues, I will never be allowed to visit the girls. I don't think about this as Brit makes sandwiches from fatty ham, stale white bread, and cheap mustard. While Jessie eats her second sandwich, I envision what would happen if my journal exercise from sixteen days ago becomes truth, if Jessie commits suicide.

Cheryl would write the obituary with the information from Jessie's file. Most of Jessie's history would get ignored. Cheryl would write nothing about molestations, drug usage, and court convictions. Cheryl would scribble down when Jessie was born, when her mother died, and how many years Jessie lived.

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on leaves their lives.

At Jessie's funeral, Katie, Donna, Sarah, and Brit would attend because Tonya would hope it would be therapeutic. The seven Mountainview workers, including me, would stand with bowed heads. A few workers from Four Corners Mental Health and Colorado Social Services would fill out the crowd. All but the residents would be paid to attend the funeral, with the state picking up the tab. We would attend out of sadness and guilt—the only family Jessie has.

The girls shake me from my thoughts as they begin cleaning up the dishes. I pull out a board game, Life. The girls harmlessly argue about who gets the blue, red, orange, yellow, and green cars. When Donna is the first to get married, the girls squeal, and when Katie gets a job as a doctor, Jessie exclaims, "Yeah, right. The only way you'll earn fifty grand a year is if you become a hooker," and then with a finger and a thumb, she flicks the small car off the board and across the carpet, the pink and blue stick-figure family lost in shag. I should discipline Jessie, but I look at the clock and realize Laura arrives in ten minutes.

At three Laura enters Mountainview, interrupting the game. I stand and write the last of my hours on the time sheet, and then Laura hugs me goodbye. The residents line up in the hallway. By the look on their faces, I know they feel abandoned as one more person leaves their lives. But I also suspect that they feel jealous that I can walk from Mountainview without anyone calling the cops.

Off the clock and no longer employed by the state, I hug each girl. I embrace Jessie first and feel uncomfortable holding her in my arms. After my goodbyes, I push open the door and leave Mountainview. The alarm screeches. I wave at the residents and begin walking home beside the Animas de las Perdidas River. This town smells like a doused campfire.

As I walk I make a wish for each resident. I wish for Katie's father to rejoin her life. For Donna I ask that she learns to trust people. I want Sarah to stops thinking she is tainted and impure. For Brit, I hope she learns again to love her mother. And Jessie, I save for last.

In the distance the unburned San Juan Mountains shimmer green beneath perfect Colorado blue skies. Three months from now the first snows of the season will cling to the jagged peaks. Closer to town, mud and charred trees cleave to Missionary Ridge. In one year, yarrow, columbine, and thistle will grow from the scorched soil. In three years, sage and yucca will sprout coarse growths. In five, junipers, pinyons, and gambel oaks will shoot from the red dirt. In fifteen, trees again will shade this hillside green. In thirty, many people will have forgotten all about this summer of devastation.

Beside me, the Animas runs languidly. Boulders that have been submerged for years now thrust above the surface. Swimming holes shrink and shrink until they become too shallow for locals to slip into on hot summer days like today. I don't even contemplate taking a dip. But I do stop along the banks of the Animas and pick a flat pebble from the bank and turn it in my hand, feeling for where to grip my fingers. I return to Jessie's wish. I want her to be healed, to be happy. But that feels too big, too hopeful, too impossible to even dream. I throw the small stone across the surface of the river. It skips three, four, five times before sinking to the bottom. I wish for the only thing I can believe in. I wish Jessie speed and strength. Circular ripples spread across the water as I wish Jessie a sleep without nightmares. The ripples dissipate one at a time until the surface smoothes again. Until it appears as if I've never skipped a pebble. I wish Jessie dead.

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