

**in your soul or on the horizon**

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# in your soul or on the horizon

by [edelgarfield](#)

## Summary

The dreams of a grieving girl, of mistakes that can't be mended.

Of what is, what was, and what will never be.

“I had that dream again,” Zoe finally says, breaking the silence.

“The one where Connor’s alive.”

## Notes

what you see here is the result of a month long fever dream; literally no one is going to read this bc it's a gen fic for a small fandom but fuck it watch me project

un-beta'd bc fuck it im so ready to be done with this thing

[rozugold](#) made an amazing [animatic](#) based on this fic!

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

Soft light filters through the sheer curtains lining the windows of Ashley Saller's office on the fourth floor of the Student Health Center. The room is a neutral gray, the only pops of color the trinkets lining the bookshelves, and the floral patterned throw pillows accenting the stiff loveseat against the wall. Zoe Murphy sits on that loveseat, trying to relax into it, but finding the back presses uncomfortably into her shoulders.

Every time, she forgets just how stiff the couch is.

(It took Zoe so long to finally walk through the doors. So many freeze frame moments on the sidewalk just outside, staring through the glass, wondering if today she'd finally have the courage to break through. And so many moments where Zoe shook her head and walked on, pushing down the perpetual ache between her ribs. It felt wrong, to accept the help that Connor had been denied.

It was a chilly winter day when Zoe finally walked in. The air was crisp, biting against her red nose. She stopped at the familiar concrete building that she passed every day. Other students parted around her, where she stood rooted to the ground. She looked through the door, and saw herself reflected in the glass. For a moment, she saw someone else: taller, all sharp edges and rough hewn angles, long hair tangling in the wind.

Connor always loved winter.

Zoe nearly broke through the glass in her haste to get inside. She took the first available appointment with graduate student Ashley Saller.)

The only sound in the small office is the hum of the white noise machine, producing a gentle drone of static that expands to fill out the awkward silences. Zoe holds a pillow against her stomach, chipped nails tracing the threads of blue flowers. Her legs are crossed, one ankle swinging anxiously in the air beneath the rolled-up cuff of her jeans.

It's bare. She can't draw stars, not after... everything.

"I had that dream again," Zoe finally says, breaking the silence.

Ashley sits up, pen poised above her notepad. Once, Zoe had tried to catch a glimpse of what exactly Ashley wrote during their sessions, but it had been an incomprehensible mess of scribbles.

"That' dream?" Ashley repeats.

In Zoe's (very limited) experience with therapy, she's found that a lot of it is just having your own thoughts parroted back at you. Ashley knows what dream she's talking about. But Ashley wants to hear it from Zoe's mouth.

"The one where Connor's alive."

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Zoe would understand dreaming about Connor. It's understandable, *expected* even, to dream about the life your dead brother should have led.

That's not what she dreams of.

She's eighteen, back from her first semester at school for the holidays with a duffel bag hanging off her shoulder. She kicks the door closed behind her, just shuffling off her shoes when a familiar shadow darkens the doorway.

(Not familiar to the Zoe behind her eyes, whose Connor never let blue dye wash out of his hair, dark roots beginning to poke through, whose Connor never got that eyebrow piercing, whose Connor never aged past seventeen.)

"I thought you were back tomorrow," Connor grumbles, turning around, cigarette hanging loosely between his fingers.

Clearly, Connor had been expecting someone else. Zoe scowls at his back. "What are *you* doing here."

Connor takes a drag from his cigarette, glancing over his shoulder with a raised eyebrow. His words come out in a cloud of smoke. "I *live* here."

*Of course you do, Zoe doesn't spit out with all the venom that wells up behind her ribcage. How could I forget, no matter how much I pretend, I'm still stuck here.*

Instead she huffs out a defeated, "Don't smoke in the house." and stomps up the stairs to her room. The thump of her bag on the floor echoes throughout the (almost) empty house. When Cynthia comes home, she panics at the thick stench of smoke clinging to the curtains like a second skin. She spends the rest of the evening with all the windows open, deep cleaning the curtains to try and get the smell out. It's all for naught, because when Larry comes home, the canned Ocean Mist hanging in the air gives it away. He and Cynthia bicker into the night, their screams becoming the roar of thunder overhead.

Zoe lies in a familiar room that used to bring her sanctuary. But everything feels wrong, like a vision through a warped mirror. She remembers sticking glow in the dark stars to the overhead fan as a little girl, but when she tries to focus on them, they blur and streak before her eyes. The fan clicks overhead, drowned by the voices of her parents. Their voices blur together like the stars, like the colors of her room streaked through oil. The scream of voices becomes a train bearing down the tracks, the buzzing in her bones.

Zoe smothers herself with her pillow, the cotton scratching against her skin like steel. She screams and screams and screams, but her voice is lost in the roar of thunder, these four walls smearing like paint on a canvas.

The world blurs, white paint layered over old to start anew.

Zoe finds herself in a familiar kitchen, the one she grew up in. Sunlight streams through the window, delicate lace curtains pulled back to let it in. Whenever Zoe tries to look outside, the

world blurs, a camera just out of focus. The kitchen table sits at the center of that golden sunlight, set for two.

Across from her is Connor, long limbs struggling to fit on the dainty wicker chairs Cynthia favored. Patches of bleached hair poke through his hair dye, as he fiddles with the piercing above his left brow. For a minute, Zoe sits in silence, watching this person she never knew, the way his eyes stare into the distance. She wonders what he's thinking, if dreams think anything at all.

Finally, his eyes catch hers, as if seeing her for the first time. "Oh," he says, voice scratchy and deeper than Zoe remembers. "It's you."

"Yup," Zoe says, sitting on her hands and fighting the urge to reach out for her brother.

Connor smiles wryly, and it doesn't reach his eyes. "Still dreaming?"

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When Zoe comes home from her first semester at university, Cynthia *refuses* to let her make the trip by herself. Even though Zoe is perfectly capable of taking a train, or a bus, or even catching a ride with a friend for the short trip back home. It's annoying, but Zoe finds it hard to argue.

As close as her school is, it had been... difficult for her parents to send her off to college. It still is. Larry even retired his ancient Blackberry for a smartphone, just so he can text Zoe. He still composes every text like a letter, and it makes Zoe's heart swell with an ache she can't name.

But healed over scars still shine through, in the way Cynthia calls her every time Zoe goes more than a few hours without responding. Cynthia tries to sound cheerful, nonchalant, like she hasn't been afraid that her only living child is dead.

So Cynthia doesn't let Zoe take a train, or a bus, or ride with a friend. Instead, Cynthia drives up herself, braving the city traffic to pick Zoe up after her last exam. Zoe's ready, waiting with her bag in the loading bay outside her dorm. She catches sight of Cynthia's silver-gray Lexus and waves her over, her heart beginning to race in her chest. It feels like so long since she's seen her family; Zoe feels like a different person than the one who left just a few months ago.

Zoe's face splits into a tentative smile as Cynthia slows to a stop. She begins to lift her bag into the backseat, only to find someone taking it out of her hands.

"Dad?" she asks, brow furrowed as Larry Murphy loads her bag into Cynthia's car.

He smiles at her, in a way Zoe has only grown familiar with in the past couple years. "It's so good to see you."

There's a sheen to his eyes that they both pretend isn't there as Larry stoops to wrap Zoe in a hug.

Zoe limply returns the embrace, the world still tilting beneath her feet. “What are you doing here?”

Larry looks at her like *she's* the weird one, like his presence isn't a complete anomaly. “We're here to pick you up, sweetheart.”

Another thing Zoe has had to get used to in recent years. Zoe can't help but flush at the endearment, at the way it rolls off her dad's tongue like he's been saying it her whole life. The car behind Cynthia honks and Zoe shakes herself out of her stupor. She climbs into the backseat as Larry climbs into the front.

“How was your exam?” Cynthia asks as they pull back onto the road.

Zoe's staring at the back of her dad's head, trying to figure out if there's something she missed, some obvious reason that Larry is here. “Um, okay I think?” Zoe shrugs. “I feel like I knew most of the answers, but I haven't talked to anyone else.”

Larry nods knowingly. “It always depends on the curve, anyway.”

Zoe furrows her brow. “...Yeah.” She feels like someone has replaced the father she's known her whole life. “Dad, you... took off work?”

Zoe remembers all the vacations that Cynthia had to practically drag him on, how even at their cabin in Vail, Larry would blockade the master bedroom and hold conference calls, would abruptly leave the dinner table when his phone rang. Zoe thinks of all the jazz concerts he missed, the empty chair at Cynthia's side never filled. And yet here he was, now, like he'd been waiting for her the whole time, and not the other way around.

“Oh, let's not talk about *work*,” Cynthia says with false cheer.

“Of course I came,” Larry says anyway. “I wanted to see you.”

His eyes meet Zoe's through the rearview mirror. She sees the weight of all those missed opportunities heavy on his brow, the same as hers when she looks into the mirror and sees her brother. All those moments that could have, *should have* been, and the future they might have written are reflected in their eyes.

“Yeah,” Zoe says, her words faraway as if through a dream. “I wanted to see you, too.”

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The first time Zoe Dreams of Connor, she's newly seventeen. She stands in that familiar kitchen, the world out of focus through the blur of golden sunlight. Connor sits at the table, and for a moment, Zoe thinks this must be a memory. She's watched many of those play out in her dreams, half forgotten moments with Connor, yellowing like old photographs worn by time. But her skin prickles with a new energy, and somehow she knows this is different.

She pulls out the chair across from Connor, and it squeaks along the floor. Connor's eyes dart to her, wide and then accusing. She freezes under the weight of his glare.

“What are *you* doing here?”

Zoe watches him, the familiar way his mouth forms around those words, crystal clear like she could reach out and touch them. His hand tightens on the chair, nails scratching into the wood.

“I’m dreaming.” The words feel heavy in her mouth, in a way she’s wholly unused to.

Connor raises a brow in... challenge? defiance?

Zoe had never been good at reading Connor’s expression while he was alive. That certainly hasn’t changed now that he was dead.

“Are you?”

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Zoe sat on the curb outside school, hands hidden beneath oversized sleeves where they grip her knees tight to her chest. She tried to make herself look as small as possible, hoping that if she became small enough, Mr. Morales would forget she was here, and she wouldn’t have to feel his pitying gaze burrowing into her skin.

“Your mom said she was on her way?” he asked for the third time, trying to mask his impatience with concern.

Or maybe Zoe was the impatient one, and she was projecting. “Yeah,” she mumbled.

She wasn’t sure what was taking her mother so long. They only lived a couple miles from the high school. That was one of the reasons newlyweds Larry and Cynthia Murphy had bought the house almost two decades ago. In the time Zoe had sat on the curb sulking, she could have walked home, shut her door and sulked in the privacy of her own home. But Cynthia had insisted on picking Zoe up herself, that the roads Zoe would have to cross were too busy and Cynthia didn’t want her daughter walking them in the fading sunlight by herself.

So Zoe waited, keeping the jazz band instructor hostage because he took pity on the poor girl stranded without a ride home.

Mr. Morales bit his lip, words on his tongue that he hesitated to voice. He was probably ready to offer her a ride home *himself*. He was ready to leave forty-five minutes ago, when practice ended, but instead was stuck here, babysitting someone else’s kid. Before he could finally speak up, familiar yellow headlights cut through the darkness.

Zoe let out a sigh of relief, getting to her feet, both hands curled around the handle of her guitar, held in front of her like a shield. “That’s me,” she said, as if it wasn’t obvious when the silver-gray Lexus rolled to a stop in front of them.

Zoe wordlessly set her guitar in the backseat as Cynthia jumped out of the car, making an aborted movement to help Zoe. But Zoe ignored her, already climbing into the passenger’s seat and buckling in.

Cynthia turned her frantic energy on Mr. Morales. “Thank you so much for keeping an eye on Zoe, Mister...?”

“Morales.” He extended a hand for Ms. Murphy to shake. “It’s all part of the job.”

“Still, I am *so* sorry for the trouble. My son was—”

“*Mom*,” Zoe bit out, annoyed that she’d been kept waiting, at the prospect of all the homework she still had to do, that Cynthia was about to air all their dirty laundry to her *band teacher*.

Cynthia glanced to Zoe, and stepped away, toward the car. “I think my daughter’s eager to get home.” There was a humorous lilt in her voice, like anything about this situation was funny. “Thank you so much, again.” She opened the driver’s side door. “Have a good rest of your evening!”

Cynthia’s false cheer dropped as soon as the door closed. She pulled through the empty carpool line, then back onto the main road in utter silence. Zoe stared straight ahead, out the windshield to the streetlights above, just starting to turn on.

Out of the corner of her eye, Zoe could see Cynthia biting at her lip, a sign that she was getting ready for a milquetoast apology that Zoe just didn’t have the energy for. She considered getting her headphones out of her bag, putting them in to signal that she would rather jump out of this car than talk about it. But she knew if she reached down and rummaged through her backpack, her mom would ask about *that* instead, and just the thought was exhausting.

“I am *so* sorry—”

“*Mom*,” Zoe snapped. “I don’t want to talk about it right now.”

Cynthia deflated, heavy silence filling the air between them. Zoe rested her head against the window, the rumble of the car’s engine filling her head with static. It was better than the bubbling anger beneath her skin. She just wanted silence, and sleep, and for tomorrow to come with the promise of a better life.

“I’m sure Connor just forgot,” Cynthia said tentatively.

And Zoe’s receding anger flared, like a cobra ready to strike. “Is that supposed to make me feel better?” she snapped.

Cynthia flinched like she’d been slapped. “I just mean—”

“—that Connor *didn’t* take the car to cut class and get high?”

Cynthia pursed her lips like she’d bit into something sour. “You don’t know that’s what he’s doing.”

Zoe rolled her eyes. “Right, because I’m sure he’s doing community service and being anything but a waste of space.”

“Zoe!” Cynthia said, as close to raising her voice as she got. “Don’t talk about your brother like that!”

“He *humiliated* me in front of my entire class! I’ve heard him say way worse shit—”



“Zoe!”

“—about me! I don’t know when you’re going to get it through your head that he doesn’t *like* us. You can’t *make* him a good person by coddling him.”

Cynthia’s hands tightened on the steering wheel, knuckles white and sharp beneath the flash of headlights. “That’s enough.”

“You know some teenager in New Jersey killed his entire family? That’s going to be *us* if you don’t *grow up*.”

“Stop it!” Cynthia screeched, slamming on the brakes.

Zoe lurched forward, bracing her hands on the dashboard. The car behind them honked, flashing them the finger as they swerved to the left. Cynthia kept her hands on the wheel, slowly rolling the car over to the side of the road. The only sounds were Cynthia’s labored breaths. She shifted into park. Zoe stared resolutely forward, refusing to make eye contact. In Zoe’s peripheral vision, she saw one hand covering Cynthia’s mouth as Cynthia hunched over the steering wheel.

Cynthia’s breathing hitched, her shoulders shaking. Zoe realized with growing horror that her mother was *crying*. The last time Zoe had seen her mother cry, Zoe was eleven, listening to her mother and Connor argue from outside the kitchen, even though she knew she wasn’t supposed to.

“I hate you!” Connor screamed, heavy footsteps signalling his exit.

Zoe quickly ducked around the corner so she wouldn’t be seen. The last time she’d run into Connor when he was angry, he’d pulled her hair and made her cry. When Connor was gone, Zoe risked peeking around the corner into the kitchen. Cynthia stood in the middle of the kitchen in a cherry-printed sundress, backlit by sunlight streaming through the window. Cynthia stared at the floor, making no move to brush away the tears rolling down her cheeks.

Zoe was frozen. What was she to do? When Zoe cried, her mother would bend down on her knee and pull Zoe into a crushing hug, and sing to her until the tears faded. But Zoe was so small, and her mother was so much *bigger* than her. There was no way Zoe could wrap Cynthia in her arms the way Cynthia did for her. Indecision rooted her to the ground.

So Zoe stayed silent, watching as Cynthia eventually wiped her tears with the collar of her dress, splashed her face with water, and put on a fake smile. Zoe ran up the stairs to her room before Cynthia could find her.

It was the first time Connor told his mother he hated her, but far from the last.

Listening to her mother’s sobs on the side of the road, Zoe was eleven again, rooted into her seat. She wasn’t good with emotion. No one in their family was. Too many nights had passed where Zoe’s problems were brushed aside in favor of Connor’s, that eventually she’d just stopped asking. Zoe lay awake at night, listening to Connor scream into his pillow through the wall they shared, and decided the price of asking him to share his feelings was too high.

She didn't know the first thing about comfort, about reaching through the impenetrable glass that separated their family.

So she didn't. She folded her arms and stared through the window, pretending she was somewhere, anywhere else, and trying not to let guilt eat at her bones. She had no reason to feel guilty, she was *right*.

Cynthia's sobs turned to sniffles, then to silence. She turned the key in the ignition and pulled back onto the road.

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Connor hums, sharp chin resting in callused hands. "And I thought you were supposed to be the *good one*."

Zoe refuses to meet his eyes, still trying to pretend this isn't happening. Surely if she recognizes this dream for what it is, it will stop haunting her when she wakes.

"*Zoe Murphy*, the perfect daughter," Connor continues, twirling his damaged hair around a finger. "Not like that useless brother of hers..." Connor's teeth glint as he smiles, all sharp edges. "At least that's what I thought."

"Fuck off!" Zoe finally snaps. "The best thing you ever did for our family was *die*."

She expects Connor to yell, to get *angry*. But instead Connor's eyes gleam, like a cat playing with its prey.

"Right," he croons, like a siren song. "That's why you're the one *dreaming*."

---

Zoe is up late, at the dust covered desk in her old room, typing furiously to put the finishing touches on an Economics paper that's due on Monday. Even though it's Thanksgiving Break, there's still work to be done. Zoe writes the final line, and stretches her arms over her head, popping all the vertebrae in her spine.

She still needs to check for typos, and make any final revisions. But that can wait until morning, Zoe's exhausted from a long day of braving the gauntlet of her family, then hiding in her room from the angry voices filling the halls, and working on this godforsaken paper that her group members were still dragging their feet on. She had already pestered them throughout the day, met with silence. It could wait until tomorrow. She was tired of being the responsible one today.

But the three cups of coffee she had downed to keep her focus were coming back to haunt her. Bathroom first, before she could sink into her inviting bed. In the warmly lit bathroom, filled with lavender scented soaps and decorative towels they were never allowed to use, Zoe took a moment to wash her face.

And in that moment, patting her face with a towel, she heard the sound of the garage door opening. Her blood ran cold, as the heavy fall of Connor's footsteps thumped up the stairs to the second floor.

There were many nights she lay awake in her bed, listening for Connor's return, wondering where he'd been, if he had a knife hidden up his sleeve, or a gun tucked into the waistband of his pants, if this was the night he finally snapped. She would wait for his footsteps down the hall, listening for if they would turn into his room, or continue down the to their parents' room.

Without fail, he would turn into his room every time. But she would still wait with bated breath, for Connor to change his mind, for the telltale sound of a gunshot ripping through the house's silence. She's planned a hundred different ways to escape in her head, (out her window, down the hall and into the garage, she can barricade her door for extra time) for a day that may never come.

She wants to believe that Connor would never do that, that he can be loud, and violent, and hateful, but he would never actually *hurt* them. But the truth is she doesn't know Connor. After these long twenty years, they're little more than strangers, existing in congruent spaces, parallel lives that are impossibly close but never cross.

Trapped in the bathroom, she can't leave until Connor's asleep, or else risk running into her brother. The less interaction with Connor the better. The voice in the back of her mind whispers that she might be the one to finally set him off. She wants to avoid that at all costs.

Zoe hears him reach the top of the stairs. Connor's right outside the door now. Zoe sits on the toilet, hands over her mouth, trying to muffle her breathing as she waits for the sound of Connor's footsteps to fade down the hall. But it never comes.

The doorknob rattles, hitting against the lock, and Zoe curses her luck. As much as she tried to avoid it, it seemed a confrontation was inevitable. She slowly stands, unlocking the door and pulling it open, coming face to face with her brother. The thick scent of smoke and sweat hits her, like a dead skunk that's ripened in the sun for days. She coughs glaring up at her brother.

His eyes are bloodshot, ringed red, and he looms in the doorway, making no move to let Zoe pass. Suddenly, Zoe understands claustrophobia intimately. She's trapped in this bathroom, her only way out barred by someone much stronger. Her fate is entirely at the mercy of her brother's moods, and all her waking nightmares of escape routes will be for naught if Connor decides to hurt her *now*.

But he just stands there, for a moment that stretches across the infinite gap that separates them. Connor's eyes stare at her but don't *see* her, unfocused and hazy.

(The Zoe behind her eyes, the one who will never cross paths with Connor in their parents' home, *screams* . She *begs* for the body she's in to *move* , to step across the silence and reach out to someone who's clearly hurting. She urges her lungs to move, to voice the words Zoe so wishes she had asked when she had the chance. To ask her brother, just once, *are you okay?*

But she never does. And the part of Zoe that's buried deep down, that she keeps hidden, thinks maybe it's for the best. That if she *did* reach out to her brother, back then, or now, in this false future she never got to see, Zoe knows *exactly* what would happen.

So maybe it's for the best, that Zoe is trapped behind her own eyes, watching this doomed future play out. She never has to feel the weight of choice, or indecision, instead a silent passenger to another Zoe's failures, rather than her own.)

Zoe scowls, watching her brother's hazy eyes try to find a single point of light to focus on. "Are you going to move?" she finally snaps.

Connor keeps watching her with that blank stare, eyes seeing something just past her shoulder. Zoe can't help but shift under his gaze, at the unbearable weight of his stare. Zoe doesn't know what he sees, can't imagine what it would be like to see through his eyes. She doesn't know what he's looking for, or if he finds it.

But he finds something, or maybe he just gets tired of looking, and he moves aside, like a forest canopy parting. Zoe shoulders past him, holding her breath, shying away from his touch like he's a virus.

When she's on the other side, and can breathe fresh air without the stench of smoke and sweat, she can't help but shoot a glance backwards. She should just continue, go back to her room, sink into her bed, and sleep the rest of this cursed weekend away. She'll wake up on Monday back in her dorm at school, and she can pretend she isn't a prisoner in this life she never asked for.

But her stubbornness has always been the worst trait of all the Murphys, and she can't help one last barb. "You're high," she spits like venom.

Connor looks at her with those red rimmed eyes. "What, are you going to tell mommy on me?"

He wants her to pick a fight. She knows that, he knows that. He wants her to say something nasty, to give him an excuse to lash out, to take out his anger on her or their parents. Zoe knows this game she's played her whole life. She's tempted to give him what he wants, to snap and scream, and take out her anger on *him* the way he's done to her.

But more than anything, more than her anger, her spite, her demons clawing up her throat, Zoe is *tired*. So she scoffs, and retreats to her room. She locks the door and falls into bed, wrapping herself tight in soft blankets, and hopes that when she wakes up, it'll be in another life.

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Zoe drums her fingers on the table, nails clicking relentlessly against the wood. Across from her, Connor stares at the ceiling, like it's the most interesting thing in the world. Zoe knows it isn't. She spent so many awkward Thanksgiving dinners counting the tiles, finishing, then counting again.

This place has almost become *familiar*, given the frequency with which she visits. It's not every night, it's not even every night she dreams of *Connor*. But it's frequent enough that she's started to wonder.

"Will you *quit* it?" Connor finally snaps, guilelessly batting her hand off the table.

It's the first time he's touched her in... well, a long time, even counting the *real* Connor. Zoe pulls her hand back like she's been slapped. She cradles her hand against her chest and watches Connor with wide eyes. He returns her stare, eyebrow raised in an echo of the brother she used to know.

"What? Are you going to run to *mommy*?" he bites. "She's not here, you know."

Zoe's throat runs dry, meeting her brother's unblinking gaze. Her gaze drifts, ever so slowly to the oil-smeared window, the world outside overlaid with itself.

"Where is *here*?" Zoe finally asks.

Connor mouth quirks into a wry smile, and he sinks back in his chair. A humorless laugh rumbles out his throat. Chills run down Zoe's spine, as she watches Connor's eyes twinkle with mirth.

"What do I know?" Connor shrugs, shoulders falling limply at his sides. "I'm dead."

---

Zoe dreams of Connor as he was, as he will never be. But the reality is this: Connor is gone, and she carries that loss with her in a hundred different, innumerable ways. Part of her wonders if this is punishment for her silence, for the anger she still struggles to let go, for all her uncountable sins.

Because, as much as Cynthia likes to believe that they could have fixed things, that if Connor had given them the chance, they could have been *happy*, Zoe knows the truth. She sees it when she dreams of a family broken beyond repair, of a boy *alive* but unhappy, of his family dragged into the dirt with him.

The truth is this: Zoe had never loved her family until Connor was gone.

She doesn't know if there's a world out there where they could have both. She's spent so many hours daydreaming what it would have been like, to reach out and ask Connor to give her a chance, to give *them* a chance. She can see it crystal clear in her mind.

At best, her brother would look at her with a blank stare, and the silence would linger, heavier than before. Zoe would shift awkwardly under the weight of his stare, the minutes passing, until she finally gave up. At worst, Connor would laugh. He would mock her for thinking he would have any interest in *repairing* things with her, and Zoe would leave in tears.

And nothing would change.

So she dreams of that future, not the one that *could have* been, the one Cynthia dreams of, where Connor is happy, and he wears the passage of time on his skin like lines on a map. Instead Zoe dreams of the future that *would have* been. Because she knows her family, and what they're capable of, and she can't imagine a world where they were enough to make Connor happy.

She goes to college, she makes friends, and she tries to forget the specter of a dead brother that looms over her shoulder. Her freshman roommate is nice enough. Her name is Olive, she's in marching band, so she's rarely in their room, always at practice, and they have something in common.

Olive is on her bed, across from where Zoe types away at her laptop on her own bed. Olive's phone buzzes, she glances at it and sighs, dropping it back onto her blue chevron bedspread. Zoe glances up, unsure if the dramatic sigh was an invitation for her to ask.

She'd had few friends at the end of high school. The only way she would make any was to reach out. So she takes the plunge.

"What was that?" Zoe asks, still typing at her computer, trying to show polite disinterest.

Olive groans, rolling onto her side to look at Zoe. "Just my little sister, she's asking me whether I took her flat iron." Olive rolls her eyes. "Siblings."

Zoe's throat closes up.

If Olive notices the sudden tension in Zoe's shoulders, she doesn't say anything. "I forget if you mentioned, do you have any siblings?"

It's such a simple question, with a horribly complex answer.

Does Zoe have any siblings? She did, once. But now he's gone. Connor doesn't stop existing now that he's dead, does he? But Zoe imagines telling the truth, saying that she had a sibling and explaining that he was dead, that he'd killed himself. For the last two years of high school, she'd been the girl with the dead brother. People only ever knew her as Connor's sister, and the specter of the failed Connor Project haunted her wherever she went. Her tragedy was on display for the world to see, to pick apart and dissect and decide whether she'd done enough when her brother was hurting, ignoring the hurt she carried with her every day.

That *couldn't* happen again.

"No, I don't," Zoe says before she can think twice, and she feels guilty as soon as the words leave her mouth.

For the first two months of college, that's who she is. Zoe Murphy, who doesn't have siblings, has never had siblings, whose brother didn't kill himself two years ago. People look at her without pity, they don't pull her aside to gently ask if she's okay, she can laugh without worrying that people are judging her for being happy.

But her brother still lingers, even when he's gone.

Her first year psychology seminar is required for all freshman psychology majors. It's mostly useless, different professors from different specializations come in every week to try and recruit freshman to take their courses, alumni discuss their career paths, and Zoe pretends

she's interested, but really there are much better things she could be doing on a Wednesday afternoon.

But she still sits in the third row, because Cynthia told her again and again, that when her class had hundreds of people in it, it was important for her professors to know her face. Today, someone from the career center stands at the podium, slides queued up on the screen, and they stare out over the classroom of sweaty eighteen year olds that would rather be anywhere else. She's young, probably just out of grad school, with red lipstick and cat-eye glasses, and probably got sent because they thought she'd be best at relating to the students. She introduces herself as Miss Lyndon.

The presentation starts, and Zoe tunes out, doodling stars into her notebook instead of her jeans. Halfway through, Miss Lyndon exits out of the slideshow and pulls up Google.

"Now, in this day and age, managing your image online is as important as managing you image in person. If I could have a volunteer?"

Maybe it was too hot in the lecture hall that day, or too beautiful of a day outside that everyone was missing, but no one raised their hand.

Miss Lyndon didn't let her smile fall. "No volunteers? In that case I'll have to pick someone," she threatened.

Still, no one took the bait, and Miss Lyndon's eyes scanned the crowd, landing on Zoe in the third row. "You, in the blue sweater," she says, pointing at Zoe.

Zoe glances around, making sure there's no one else nearby in a blue sweater.

"What's your name?" Miss Lyndon asks.

"Um." Zoe's voice sounds impossibly small in the crowded lecture hall, and she's horribly aware this will be the first time most of her classmates hear her voice. "Zoe Murphy?" she says like a question.

"And where are you from, Miss Zoe Murphy?"

"Uh, Albany."

Miss Lyndon nods, seeming pleased with that answer. "Now, the first thing any employer is going to do before inviting you in for an interview is Google you." Her fingers fly on the keys faster than Zoe's mind can register what's happening. "So, if we search for ' *Zoe Murphy Albany...* '"

Zoe knows exactly what's going to happen the moment before it crystallizes into reality. "Wait, don't...!" She shoots out of her seat.

But with one click, it's already done, and everything Zoe has been running from is displayed on the projector for hundreds of strangers. Connor's obituary, the damned Connor Project, that *speech*, all there for everyone to see.

*Connor Murphy is survived by his loving parents, Larry and Cynthia Murphy, and his sister Zoe Murphy.*

Nothing about Zoe's graduation, her jazz band accolades, her own Facebook. It's all Connor, Connor, Connor. And that's just fitting, isn't it? Everything that makes Zoe Zoe is made of the parts that Connor left behind. Zoe feels the eyes of all her classmates at her back, staring at the Girl with the Dead Brother, and passing judgment on the actions of a scared, sixteen year old girl.

The weight of hundreds of people inviting themselves into her life bears down on her shoulders. Zoe runs out, head down, not even bothering to gather her things. She just needs to get out. She needs this day to be over, to close her eyes and wake up in another life.

After class, when she slinks back in to gather her bag, the professor takes her aside and apologizes, promises nothing like this will ever happen again. She wants to spit venom, say that she's glad her sacrifice means no one else will have their privacy violated. But she bites it down, like she has her whole life. The damage is done.

She was foolish for thinking she'd ever be anything other than Connor's sister.

Afterwards, strangers come up to her, they pull her aside while she walks between classes, trying to live a normal life. They tell her how their brother/sister/grandma killed themselves, they say they understand what she's going through, that they'll listen if she ever wants to talk.

"You don't," is what she wants to say. "You don't understand what it's like to be expected to grieve for someone you never knew, who you know you were better off without." She can feel the words like venom on her tongue.

"Did you swallow pretty lies from a stranger because you were so desperate to believe your brother was someone worthy of being mourned?" Zoe's throat burns with all the words she will never scream. "Did you watch it all come crumbling down, stand in the ashes and realize you never had, never *would* know him?"

"How *dare* you insert yourself in my tragedy. How *dare* you read a webpage and think you *know* me, that you understand what me and my family have been through." She wants to yell at all the people that left scathing notes in her locker, the people that watch her with pity in their eyes. Anyone that thinks they can stand to pass judgment on her.

"People like you make me relive the worst years of my life and tell me they're doing me a favor. But you're doing it for *you*, so you can soak up my tragedy and walk away when you've gotten your fill."

After Connor's death, so many people stepped into her life to cry on her shoulder, expecting her to comfort *them* as if the loss they were experiencing was *real*. Zoe did, because that was expected of her. The good grieving girl people wanted to see her as. And when their tears ran dry, when Zoe's emotions showed themselves for the gnarled, ugly things they were, they stepped out, leaving Zoe to pick up the pieces.



“I don’t *get* to walk away!” Zoe’s fists clench on the messenger bag at her side. “I have to live with this *every day!*” Tears sting the corners of Zoe’s eyes.

She doesn’t say any of those things. She pushes the words and venom down as she has her whole life, locks it inside the ugly part of her that isn’t allowed to see the light of day.

Zoe smiles, but it doesn’t reach her eyes. “Thank you.”

She walks away, and none of those people ever try to talk to her again.

---

“Wow, you *really* have it rough.”

Connor’s voice grates on her nerves. Zoe shifts in her chair, angled away from him.

“Shut up.”

“No, *really*.” His voice drips with sarcasm, just the way Zoe remembers. “I know I’m *dead*, but you got the real shit end of the deal.”

“Fuck off,” Zoe snaps. “You don’t get to judge me when—” She bites her lip to keep the rest of the words from spilling out.

Connor’s mouth breaks into a shit eating grin, and he leans forward like they’re about to share a secret. “When what?”

Zoe shakes her head, like she can shake the thoughts from her mind. “Nothing.”

Connor purses his lips, clearly dissatisfied with that answer. “At least let me guess. *When...* it’s my fault?” He starts counting off on his fingers. “When I left you to clean up my mess? When I got to take the easy way out?”

“Stop it!” Zoe shrieks, shattering the stillness of this picturesque kitchen.

Connor doesn’t seem the least bit fazed by her outburst. “I was just saying what the both of us were thinking.”

“I don’t think that.” Zoe’s words sound false even to her own ears.

“Oh please.” Connor’s mouth quirks into a smile. “We both know you hated me.”

Zoe shakes her head. “I didn’t even know you.”

And that’s the truth of it, isn’t it? All those years she spent living alongside her brother, and she couldn’t even tell you his favorite color.

She watches these scenes play out when she sleeps, all her past, present, and future mistakes laid out in plain view. But she can never change a thing. She can’t take her own shaking hands and say “*I know. I know it hurts.*” She can’t tell Connor all the hundreds of things she wishes she’d said. She can’t change herself. The person she was, is, and would have been.

She could never have said those things. Not while Connor was alive.

When she catches Connor's eyes, he's watching her with sharp eyes. He's older than he was when Connor died, adulthood burgeoning on his shoulders. He wears it well, his acne scars fading, eyeliner smudging at the corners of his eyes. He looks like a *person*, instead of the hollowed out shell Zoe remembers him as.

"Do you want to?" Connor finally asks. He gestures at himself, nails painted a dark, dark purple. "Know me?"

But maybe Connor was always a person. Zoe just hadn't seen it until it was too late.

---

It's rare that Larry takes time out of his busy work schedule to spend it with his children. Ever since Zoe can remember, he's worked long hours at the firm. She remembers a time when she was very young that her father took Sundays off, and they would go to the orchard, or the movies, or the park. He would turn off his phone, and all his attention would be focused solely on his family.

And slowly, as Zoe grew older, Larry's work seeped into the other parts of his life, like a water stain, slowly growing until the foundation crumbled. Larry started to work half days on Sunday, stayed at work until the late hours of the evening, was too tired to spend time with his children when he came home.

That didn't change now that Zoe was an adult. Sometimes it felt the only way she could see her father was by making an appointment. She did her best, because Cynthia insisted and because Larry was paying her tuition.

But trying was a two way street. Larry bailed on their plan to eat at the (fake) Mexican restaurant near their house, so Zoe ordered pizza, ignoring Cynthia's protests. She took half up to her room, intending to watch Netflix on her laptop, and ignore the fact that she was always her dad's second priority. Larry didn't come home until almost nine, long after the grease and fat became a stone in Zoe's gut.

She heard the garage signal his arrival, and his footsteps coming up the stairs. She'd hoped that he would know better than to bother her. But she had her father's stubbornness, and he knocked on her door promptly after getting changed.

Zoe briefly considered staying quiet, burying her head under her covers and pretending to be asleep. But Larry ruins that plan by barging in without giving Zoe a chance to respond. Like father like son. Larry lounging on her bed, laptop on her stomach.

"How are you, Zoe?" Larry asks, like he hadn't ruined her plans for the evening.

Zoe meets his eyes briefly, before looking back to her computer. "Fine," she says tersely. "There's real pizza in the oven, if Connor hasn't eaten all of it." Her voice is bland, monotone, because if she puts any emotion into it at all, she'll give away her anger.

For all the emotional cues that Larry has missed over the years, he's not oblivious. "I wish I could have made it tonight," he says blithely. "But there was a last minute request from a client, you understand."

There's always a request, a deadline, an emergency, or simply the weight of all those long hours sapping what little energy Larry has left to spend with his family. Zoe has grown used to the disappointment. Another cancelled dinner, another missed concert, another day where she goes to bed without even crossing paths with her father; what difference does it make?

"It's fine."

It's not fine.

Larry takes another step into the room, like he's been invited, like it's his right to trample on this space that Zoe has spent two decades carving out for herself. "I wanted to talk to you."

That's never a good sign. Larry spends so little of his time talking with his family, that whenever he makes a point of it, trims precious time out of his day to just *talk*, it's always something Larry deems worthwhile. What Larry and his children find important rarely aligns.

Zoe recognizes she's not getting out of this conversation tonight. She shuts her laptop with a sigh, placing it on her bedside table. The lines around Larry's mouth deepen.

"Don't give me that attitude," he says, like she's a thirteen year old girl and not a grown woman.

"I'm not."

Zoe sits up. She could snap that she has every right to have an "attitude." Larry brushes her aside when she *wants* to see him, then demands her time and attention on *his* terms. It isn't the first time, and it certainly won't be the last. She's tired after avoiding fights with Connor and Cynthia all day, stressed about upcoming finals, and the prospect of a long summer she needs to fill, yet can't muster even one scrap of ambition from the well inside her.

She is *so, so* tired.

Larry eyes her with a withering look, an argument brewing behind his eyes. But he breathes in, and it fades. "What are your plans for the summer?"

It's the absolute *last* thing Zoe wants to talk about.

She shrugs, feigning nonchalance even though the anxiety ratchets up inside her throat. "I haven't decided yet," she says, as if she has a wealth of options she just needs to choose from.

The furrow between Larry's brow deepens, clearly not satisfied with that answer. "All of your classmates have already gotten jobs and internships."

"I know," Zoe bites, harsher than she means to.

But she *does* know. Everywhere she looks, her classmates are talking about their plans, high profile companies that they'll be joining for the summer, the faraway places they'll be studying, all the value they're adding to themselves like they're commodities and not *people*. They ask Zoe what *her* plans are, where *she'll* be working.

And every time, Zoe's tongue swells in her mouth, and she stumbles over her words to say she's still looking, still figuring out where she best fits. And the conversation awkwardly carries on.

The truth is Zoe doesn't know where to *start* looking. She doesn't know *how*. It's all she can do to stay above water in her classes. She works hard and *it shows* in her grades and in the way her peers look to her for guidance. But it's *so exhausting*.

She wakes up every morning dreading the day ahead, but she does it anyway, as she's always done. She drags her leaden bones out of bed, eats dry cereal out of the box, and puts on a false smile. She goes to class tired, takes notes and listens like she's supposed to. She does her schoolwork, strums notes on her guitar that sing emotions she can't entirely remember feeling, and goes home. She sinks into bed like an ocean worn ship returning to shore, and it's the closest to comfort she's felt all day. She goes to sleep and does it all over again.

She does what she's supposed to. She can't imagine doing any more.

"This is important," Larry says sternly. "You need to think about your future."

Zoe thinks about her future every day, about the nebulous length of time stretching out before her that she's expected to fill. Empty decades stare back at her and ask her to find purpose in this shell of a life she never asked for.

She's spent her whole life playing her part, following the framework that Cynthia and Larry laid out for her. When she was ten, Cynthia signed her up for piano lessons and she played on the electronic keyboard in her room, no one ever asked what Zoe wanted. It was only after years of begging that Cynthia let her switch to guitar. They asked her what she wanted to major in, but never asked if she wanted to go to college in the first place.

Then suddenly, she's expected to know what she wants, how to live a life that isn't dictated to her step by step. She doesn't know where to look for guidance. She doesn't know how to start.

Everyone keeps asking her questions without providing any answers.

"What about Connor?" Zoe snaps. "What about *his* future?"

Larry scowls. "This isn't about your brother."

"Right," Zoe scoffs. "It's never about him."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Larry's mouth pulls into a grim line.

"It means I have to be perfect but you let Connor do whatever he wants!" Zoe's voice finally raises, her anger clawing at her tongue. "It's not fair!"

“Life isn’t fair.”

“But you could choose to be!” Larry could *choose* to treat them fairly, with respect, and care, and every day he *chooses* not to. “But you gave up on Connor because he’s a fuck up and instead you put all your *bullshit* expectations on me!”

Larry squares his shoulders. “You *are not* allowed to use that language in my house.”

“Just like Connor isn’t allowed to smoke? Or is supposed to take his meds? And call mom instead of driving high?” All the rules Larry had laid out for Connor that Connor had broken. All the times Cynthia had blocked Larry’s punishments, until their rules meant nothing at all.

“We can talk about your brother later, right now we’re talking about your future.”

“When is ‘later?’” Zoe challenged. “You never have *time* for ‘later!’”

“I work hard so that you and Connor can have good lives!”

“Because our lives are so *fucking* good!” Zoe screams, shooting up from her bed.

She knows, has always known, that Larry devotes so much time to his job because to him, the best way to take care of them is to provide for their every material need. But when it comes to emotions, to actually spending *time* with the people he brought into this world, he falls short in so many ways. He continues to fall short despite so many signs that it’s not enough, despite being given infinite opportunities to change, he never does.

“You have no idea how lucky you are!” Larry seethes. “You’ve gotten everything you ever asked for!”

It’s true. She and Connor have never wanted for anything, besides a loving family.

“What about time with *you*?” Zoe snaps. “You’re always too busy fixing Connor’s fuck ups to spare any time for me!”

“I don’t spend more time with him—”

“But you *do*!” The force of Zoe’s scream rubs her throat raw. “All he ever does is ruin things but you’ve still spent twenty years trying to *fix* him and it hasn’t worked! You keep trying to do stuff with him even though he tells you to fuck off every time!”

Hot needles pierce the back of Zoe’s eyes. She can feel the heat on her face, knowing the knot of anger and sorrow around her throat was threatening to strangle her. She takes a deep, gasping breath to steady herself. But the words keep coming unbidden, spilling out of her mouth like water flowing through her fingers.

(Below her skin, Zoe screams. She claws at the edges of her consciousness, nails digging into the images playing out before her eyes and tears through them. Reality breaks apart at the seams, but the scene keeps playing out, racing towards the cliff’s edge. Zoe is trapped, can never force the words up her throat, can never stop her hands from tearing everything apart.

She's a prisoner in her own body, spitting up angry barbs tinged with blood, and unable to ever stop.

*"Don't you know how lucky you are?"* she wants to scream.)

"I've done everything you ever asked of me, but the only time you ever bother to talk to me is to tell me I'm not doing good enough!" Her words are wet, spoken through tears beading on her lashes. "I *went* to college, I get good grades, I didn't need you to bail me out for a fucking *DUI*! I'm *right* here and you've never *once* tried to reach out to me!"

Cheeks marred with tear tracks, she meets her father's gaze with blurry vision. He's always been uncomfortable with emotions besides anger. Anger was familiar to him. He had no trouble voicing his frustrations to his family. But sorrow was kept behind closed doors. When their children cried, Larry quietly left and sent Cynthia in his place.

Larry watches two decades of sorrow slough off Zoe's body like a second skin and doesn't have the slightest idea how to help her. So he does nothing. He watches his only daughter with wide eyes, lips parted in shock. Zoe has never expressed *any* of this to him, has never once said she felt neglected, hasn't truly yelled at him since she was sixteen. He doesn't recognize the woman in front of him, wearing his daughter's skin.

Zoe waits for a moment. Anger fades from Larry's face, replaced by shock and all the questions she doesn't have the energy to answer. He's had so many opportunities to ask them over the years and never did. She can't be bothered to hold his hand and walk him through every time he chose Connor over her.

Zoe shoulders past him, out the door and into the hallway.

Larry makes an aborted attempt to grab her. "This conversation isn't over."

Zoe doesn't bother with a response, making long strides down the hall. Connor stands just outside his door, making no attempt to hide the fact that he'd been listening. Their eyes meet.

Zoe expects to find anger, is prepared to run if he makes any sudden movements. There's anger, to be sure. Connor is always angry. But more than anything, a heaviness eclipses Connor's eyes, one Zoe finds she's starting to recognize.

Zoe gets in her car and drives. It's a chilly spring evening, but she rolls down the windows and blasts music into the empty night air. She screams the lyrics long after her voice has gone hoarse, until the only thing left in her are dry sobs, until she's too exhausted for even those.

When she returns home in the early hours of the morning, they pretend nothing ever happened.

---

"Did you really think I had it that much better than you?"

Zoe shrugs listlessly. "No? I dunno." She picks at a loose thread on her jeans. Her nails scratch against the denim and she feels it, like what she's experiencing is real. "They never

paid attention to anything I did.”

Connor’s brows furrow. Zoe almost wants to laugh, because he looks *exactly* like Larry when he does. She never noticed that before.

“Isn’t that a good thing?”

“Um, no?” To Zoe, it seems obvious. “I worked *so* hard and none of it ever mattered.”

Connor still doesn’t get it, watching her like she’s a puzzle he’s trying to figure out. “So?” Connor sits back. “You were still the favorite.”

Zoe doesn’t think she can argue with that. It’s not exactly hard to be the favorite when your brother is failing most of his classes, and just barely avoiding legal trouble. When you try your best to be quiet and unobtrusive because you’re not sure if you’re safe in your own home.

“That doesn’t mean I had it easy,” she finally says, voice so quiet she can’t be sure Connor heard.

---

At fifteen, Zoe knew exactly what her brother looked like when he was high. When she walked through their front door after band practice, she found Connor zoned out on the living room couch. She immediately knew he was high. Musty smoke and day-old sweat clung to Connor, expanding to fill the space of the living room. Connor stared blankly at the ceiling, entirely oblivious to Zoe’s entry.

Zoe rolled her eyes, turning on her heel to enter the kitchen, where Cynthia sat at the table, reading. Normally, Cynthia would recline on her armchair in the living room to read, where it was more comfortable and natural sunlight would stream in from the backyard. But clearly, Cynthia didn’t want to wait in the same room as Connor, with the heavy scent of ash clouding the air. Yet she didn’t want to leave Connor alone, where he could hurt himself, choke on his own vomit, or any number of things that would make Cynthia feel guilt she hadn’t earned.

Zoe’s shoes clicked on the hardwood floor. Cynthia looked up, meeting her daughter’s eyes in the doorway.

“Oh, you’re home.” Cynthia smiled gently. “I really appreciate you getting a ride with a friend. Thank you for understanding.”

Zoe’s fists tightened around the straps on her backpack. She’d never once claimed to understand. When Cynthia had texted her to ask if she could please get a ride home from someone else, Zoe had sighed and angrily shoved her phone into her bag. She bit the inside of her cheek and asked if Laurel’s mom could please give her a ride home.

Zoe *didn’t* understand what could be so important for Cynthia to abandon her at school, why she was secondary at best in everyone’s lives. Coming home and finding it was Connor passed out on the couch just twisted the knife. It was just like Cynthia to toss Zoe aside

whenever Connor needed someone to hold his hand. Zoe didn't know why she expected anything else.

Zoe gave Cynthia a withering glare and shrugged her backpack onto the floor. It landed with a *thump* that made Cynthia jolt in her chair. Cynthia settled, giving Zoe a tentative smile, brushing past Zoe's prickly exterior.

"How was practice, sweetie?" Cynthia asked gently.

Zoe ignored her, gesturing back towards the living room. "You know Connor's high, right?"

Cynthia's smile dropped like a bird shot from the sky. "Zoe," she said, with the same tone she used to use when scolding Zoe for stealing a cookie from the stovetop.

"It's true!" Zoe said childishly. "Are you just going to cover for him for dad again?"

Cynthia's expression crumpled, like a flower wilting before Zoe's eyes. "Zoe, please..."

"He's never going to change if you just let him do whatever he wants!" Zoe's voice rose, breaking the shroud of silence fallen over the rest of the house.

Cynthia let out a long, world-weary sigh. "I don't want to talk about this with you. I'll discuss this with your father later."

"Will you?" Zoe challenged. "Or will you sweep it under the rug and pretend nothing happened?"

Faintly, Zoe heard shuffling in the other room, enough to suggest that her yelling had woken Connor. But Zoe found she didn't have any scraps of empathy left to offer him.

"Zoe!" Cynthia's voice grew stern. "I am your mother and I am not discussing this with you!"

"When are you going to *do* something about him?" Zoe asked desperately.

Zoe just wanted to feel safe in her own home. She didn't want her head to be filled with thoughts of fratricide. She was sick of rising from her bed in the middle of the night to check the lock on her door, to make sure the monster she knew was still barred outside. Connor had only gotten worse over time; angrier, threats of violence feeling more and more real. How much were they going to let it escalate?

Zoe felt she was on rail, speeding to one possible end, while her parents stood on the platform, watching, never reaching out a hand to pull her back.

Connor stumbled into the kitchen, steadying himself with a hand on the wall. He loomed over Zoe like the shadow she could never escape.

"You're talking about me." He stumbled over his words, his anger dampened by the drugs.

Cynthia smiled at him gently. "No, sweetie, of course we weren't—"



“You were!” Connor screamed, that ever present rage piercing through the haze. “I heard you!” He pulled his hand from the wall, balling it into a fist at his side. “I know you all think I’m dumb but I’m *not!*”

Something like tears clung to the edges of his voice. But Zoe knew her brother, he didn’t *cry*.

“Connor, of course we don’t think that—”

“Then maybe you should stop doing dumb stuff,” Zoe countered.

Connor’s red-rimmed vision centered on her with laser sharp focus, at the same time Cynthia shrieked “Zoe!”

“What,” Connor hissed, knuckles turning white at his sides.

“Maybe if you don’t want us to think you’re dumb...” Zoe swallowed, her mouth suddenly running dry. “You should stop being a *dumbass*.”

Zoe knew she was stepping over the line, knew that she should leave and let Connor’s anger quietly simmer out. But every day she swallowed her words, and every day she broke into pieces. Every day she felt unwelcome in her own home. Something needed to change; this was the only way she knew how.

For the first time, Connor’s vision cleared, the red haze fading as Zoe snapped into focus. “What do you know?” he spat. “The only reason anyone likes you is because you’re a two-faced *bitch*.”

It stung, the part of Zoe that wanted so hard to be liked, for someone to see *her* instead of her brother. “I wouldn’t have to be if *you* weren’t such a fucking *loser!*”

Connor raised his fist in slow motion, a cobra ready to sink its fangs into the meat of Zoe’s throat. *Finally*, Zoe thought, even as she flinched away.

“That’s enough!” Cynthia shrieked, her chair clattering to the ground.

Zoe and Connor sprung apart like they’d been shocked, Connor’s hand fell to his side limply. But the weight of what just happened, what Connor had almost done, hung in the air. Cynthia looked between her children wordlessly.

Cynthia saw shadows of their younger selves, older and weathered with time. She remembered days at the apple orchard, where she would lounge on a red blanket in the sun, the only sound her children’s laughter like ringing bells. Connor and Zoe would chase each other over the rolling hills with grass stained jeans and toothy smiles, until they collapsed onto the blanket at Cynthia’s side. She would wrap her arms around them both and hold them close.

How did they get here?

“Zoe, go to your room,” Cynthia said, voice hoarse.

Zoe jolted out of her thoughts. “Why *me?*” she asked indignantly. “Connor was about to—”

“Zoe,” Cynthia strained.

Zoe pressed her mouth closed. All the words died in her throat. No matter how much she screamed, she was never heard. Wordlessly, Zoe turned out of the kitchen, refusing to look at Connor. If she never saw him again, she could live happy. Zoe stomped up the stairs, slamming her bedroom door.

She didn’t even bother to listen for Connor and Cynthia’s muffled voices downstairs. She knew nothing would ever change.

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For once, Connor doesn’t speak.

He shrinks into the seat of that same wicker chair he sits in every time Zoe visits. It’s the one where the reeds on the left arm are fraying. Connor spent every awkward dinner picking at it, slowly ruining the weave all along the armrest. He picks at it now, refusing to meet Zoe’s eyes, and he makes himself look as small as possible, knees pulled to his chest.

He wears the skin of the Other Connor, the twenty year old man that never killed himself and lives in a broken home. But when the light hits him just right, that seventeen year old boy flickers into focus for just a moment.

Zoe never spent much time just *looking* at Connor. Not when he was alive, and not now. He’s blurred at the edges, an image separated by a pane of frosted glass. His features come into focus, the scar above his eyebrow where that piercing used to be, the cracked skin on his knuckles, the chipping blue polish on his fingers. But just as quickly, they smear, paint rubbed raw.

It hurts to look at him.

“Would you have hurt me?” Zoe finally asks, after a minute or an hour of silence.

Connor’s eyes flicker to hers, a flash of blue that blurs out of focus. He shrugs, long arms wrapped around his knees, all sharp angles that dull before Zoe’s eyes.

“If you had lived, would you have hurt me?” Zoe asks again.

Connor rests his chin on his knee, looking aside, face basking in that golden sunlight. “How should I know? I’m—”

“Dead,” he and Zoe say in unison.

Connor smirks wryly. “See, you’re getting the hang of it.”

Zoe stares past Connor, eyes unfocused. “Sometimes I think it would’ve been easier if you had.”

“Hm?”

“Hurt me,” Zoe clarifies. “If you hurt me then I could at least know that I hate you.” Zoe picks at her nails below the table.

Connor wrinkles his nose, skin bunching up in that way Zoe’s does when she smells something foul. “You know that’s fucked up right?”

Zoe just shrugs. Fucked up certainly isn’t anything new for the Murphys.

Connor's next words escape with a sigh. “Besides.” Zoe meets his eyes again. “I think I hurt you enough already.”

Zoe just watches him, eyes drifting away from Connor to that window that she can never see out of. “What’s the point?”

Connor barks out a laugh. “Not a good question to ask the kid that offed himself.”

Zoe rolls her eyes. “I meant of *this*.” She gestures between the two of them. “What’s the point of showing me all this? Of watching myself fail over and over again.”

Connor’s gaze is piercing, and here it feels so real, like a lance straight to her heart. She couldn’t possibly be dreaming “Shouldn’t you ask yourself that? Since you’re the dreamer?”

“I mean, technically I am asking myself, if you’re just part of *my* dream.”

Connor chuckles to himself. “Fair point.”

Zoe watches him, the quirk of his smile, the scraped skin on his knuckles, the jut of his collarbone. Is this really Connor as he was? Or is it just a reflection of what Zoe wants him to be? Is he Connor with all the hollow parts filled in with Zoe’s own imagination? Is he a ghost? Connor come back to haunt her with all her failures?

Or is it a different Connor altogether? From another time and place where he isn’t happy but at least he *lives*?

“*Am* I dreaming?” Zoe asks, barely a whisper under her breath.

Connor’s smile fades, replaced with that furrowed brow they both share with their father. He laces his fingers together on the table, rests his chin in the hollow of his hands and meets her gaze, her own eyes staring back at her.

“What do you believe?” he asks voice as still as an ice covered lake. “What do you *want* to believe?”

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Zoe hears over and over again that mental illness runs in bloodlines, that it exists as an unseen spectre haunting whole families, lying in wait for the right combination of triggers to bring it to the surface. Connor had never been *officially* diagnosed with anything. But in hindsight it seems obvious, that of course he suffered from *something*, that a monster bigger than a boy’s bones raged in his blood.

For the longest time, Zoe assumes that monster was all Connor's own. It overlooked her in favor of her brother, already volatile and bursting at the seams. She never considers that the monster lurks in her too, that it's been with her all this time lying in wait.

At twenty-one the blood she and Connor share finally catches up with her.

"I don't know what's wrong with me," Zoe cries in Ashley Saller's office, crumpled tissues balled in her left hand. "I'm so *angry* all the time, and when I'm not angry, I'm so *exhausted*..."

Zoe has been angry her whole life, at Connor, at her parents, at all the people who used her brother's suicide as a stepping stone. But for the first time she can't contain it. She can't swallow her words the way she has been her whole life. Instead the anger pours out of her and leaves nothing but a hollow shell in its wake.

Ashley gently takes Zoe's hand. "It's okay," she says gently. Zoe doesn't understand how *any* of this can be okay. "You're in the right place."

Ashley smiles, and the one Zoe gives her in return is the first smile Zoe's worn in weeks.

When Zoe goes home for the summer, it's with a bottle of pills in her bag. She turns it over in her hands every morning when she dutifully pops one into her mouth. How much longer would she have waited, if she didn't know what she does? If she hadn't watched Connor tear his own life apart before leaving all of their shattered in his wake? How much worse would she have gotten? How many more friendships would she ruin?

It's so unspeakably unfair that Connor is her sacrificial lamb. Zoe killed Connor on the altar so that she could be happy. It seems that way for her whole family, as Zoe's dreams reflect every night. Connor died so that they could be happy, so that she and Cynthia, and Larry could live out their dreams of a perfect family.

"How were your final exams?" Cynthia asks, chopping vegetables for dinner while Zoe peels potatoes at her side.

Fading sunlight streams through the window, the old holly tree in the backyard swaying in the breeze. Every few seconds Zoe looks over her shoulder, checking to make sure the world is still there, that she can still see the family of bluejays nesting in the branches, that she can hear their songs.

Zoe shrugs. "Alright, I guess." She wipes her hand on a dish towel. "I think I passed."

The radio hums old tunes from Cynthia's childhood, low, just below their voices. When they were children, Connor and Zoe would play in the backyard to this music, while Cynthia looked on from the window.

Cynthia laughs. "When I was your age, I felt the same way." Her knife clicks rhythmically on the cutting board.

“Right. Teaching.” Zoe tries to come up with something relatable to say from what she knows of Cynthia’s college days, and finds she can’t remember anything. “Why’d you stop?”

Cynthia shrugs. “Well, you know, Connor...” Cynthia pauses. It’s gotten easier over the years, but the hurt inside her chest never completely disappears. “Connor was young and you were on the way, and your father made enough that I wouldn’t need to work, so we decided it would be best if I stayed home with both of you.”

Zoe is quiet for a long time, the only sound the scrape of the potato peeler. “Did you like it?”

“Of course I liked it!” Cynthia laughs. Her laughter fades into the hum of the radio, eyes dimming as her smile grows wistful. “But some things were more important.”

That same knot sticks in Zoe’s throat, the one everyone in her family shares when their thoughts turn to Connor. “Why didn’t you ever go back?”

“Oh, you know.” Cynthia flushes, refusing to meet Zoe’s eyes. “By the time you were old enough things had changed. I thought...” Cynthia pointedly looks away. “I thought my time was better spent here.”

No doubt, Cynthia has walked this road many times, thought of all the diverging paths she’d ignored, wondering if Connor waits somewhere along them.

“You still could,” Zoe says quietly, setting the potato in the bowl. “Go back to teaching or... whatever.”

Cynthia sighed, brushing chunks of diced onion off her knife. “It’s hard. It’s not like I can just pick up where I left off over twenty years ago.”

Outside, a squirrel shakes a branch on the holly tree, and Zoe can almost see Connor, holding that branch with all four gangly limbs. He taunts Zoe from on high, telling her “*come get me, come get me!*” Then he jumps up and scurries higher, nails digging into the bark like they were made for it.

He always was a better climber, he could reach all the highest branches without ever looking down. Zoe lags behind, eyes darting to the ground. Her palms scrabble against the trunk, tears beading on her lashes. She wants so badly to follow her brother, but she’s paralyzed by her fear of falling.

Connor climbs higher and higher, up into the branches, until he disappears behind the canopy. Zoe squints her eyes, shifting, trying to catch a glimpse of him between the leaves. But he never stops. He never looks back.

Zoe isn’t like Connor. She tears her eyes away from that memory, to her mother, standing in the golden light of the kitchen. Cynthia is flushed, hair just starting to gray at the roots, the grief of the past few years worn into the lines of her face. But she still smiles, trying so earnestly to heal.

“I know,” Zoe says quietly. “But... you could. I...” Zoe swallows her pride, in a way she never could before Connor. “If you enjoyed it.”

“Oh, *honey*, I... you don’t need to worry about me,” Cynthia says with a gentle, sun-warmed smile.

*That’s what I thought about Connor, Zoe wants to say. I thought he didn’t look back because he didn’t need me. I never considered that he wanted to fall.*

“I just want you to be happy, mom,” Zoe says instead.

When Cynthia smiles, it’s with tears in her eyes, as she cups Zoe’s face in her hands. Standing this close, she has to look up, just a little, to meet Zoe’s eyes.

“Oh, sweetie. I *am* happy.”

And that in itself, brings a kind of hurt. It took so long to relearn happiness, to feel the warm glow of contentment and not the guilt snapping at its heels. And even now, that happiness leaves an unmistakable hole, where someone could have been to share it.

Zoe looks back, through the window, at that holly tree that Connor climbed as a child. She wonders if he’s still climbing, somewhere.

---

No matter how much Zoe stares out that window, the world swims and blurs before her eyes. The holly tree never comes into focus.

“Careful,” Connor’s voice breaks the silence. “You’ll strain your eyes.”

Zoe gasps, tears running down her cheeks, eyes burning like she’s been staring at the sun. She turns her gaze to Connor, and just like that holly tree, he shifts out of focus. His nose snaps into focus, with the same curve as their father’s.

But that wasn’t right, was it?

Connor’s face blurs, like a mistake rubbed out of a painting. When the light refocuses, he’s remade with their mother’s button nose. All his features are like that, Zoe realizes. Shifting, malleable and impermanent, like Zoe’s fading memories of her brother.

“I’m starting to forget what you look like,” Zoe realizes.

Connor’s mouth quirks into a smile (were his lips full or thin? how sharp was his cupid’s bow?), like he’s let Zoe in on a secret. “Memory is a funny thing. The harder we try to hold on the more it fades.”

“I don’t want to forget!” she says desperately.

“Then look at a picture.”

Zoe shakes her head indignantly. “It’s not the same!”

There are very few photos of Connor from the year before he died. The ones that exist show Connor rigid, unsmiling, clearly forced into a family photo. It had been an endless source of grief for Cynthia in the days before Connor's funeral. Eventually, they chose one of Connor's school photos from elementary school, when he was still carefree.

It had been surreal, to see that smiling boy juxtaposed with Connor's pallid corpse.

There are so many things that a picture could never capture: Connor's laugh, the gleam of mirth in his eyes, and the way his forehead wrinkles when he's angry. There are so few people that had known Connor when he lived, before he became The Connor Project. Zoe is one of the few that *knew* him. If she forgets, then she loses Connor.

There'd be no one left to remember Connor as he *lived*, instead of That Boy Who Killed Himself.

Connor just shrugs. "How much of me is really *Connor*, anyway?"

Zoe blinks through her tears. "What do you mean?"

"I'm part of your dream, right?" Connor gestures at himself, at the ever shifting amalgamation of features patched together by Zoe's fading memories. "You created me, took all your hopes and fears and molded them into something vaguely resembling a boy you failed to save."

"No... No, I..."

"Because it's easier to absolve yourself of guilt if you watch me fuck up my second chance. You can tell yourself that nothing would have changed."

Zoe's always been an ugly crier. She feels ugliest now, her nose running, cheeks red and chapped from all her tears, as she sobs under Connor's piercing gaze. "That's not..."

"Because *this*..." Connor gestures at himself again, at the loose conjunction of hollow parts that could never form a real person. Zoe hates herself for even *hoping* this was her brother. "Is the only way you'll ever *get* to know me."

Zoe wakes with tear tracks drying on her cheeks.

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Living in the Murphy household was a constant dance of destroying and erecting new walls around oneself. Both physical and emotional. The only time Zoe allowed all her walls to come down, to be unguarded, was in her room, with a heavy lock and thick wall between her and the rest of her family. As soon as she opened the door, cracked that physical wall, she laid a tower of bricks around her heart, so that nothing and no one could ever get through.

It was the same for everyone in their home; Larry, Cynthia, and Connor. They spent all their time erecting walls, so afraid of being hurt that they never tried to reach through those barriers. But for all the walls that kept the Murphys apart, their voices still carried.

"Larry, please," Zoe heard Cynthia beg, two sets of hurried footsteps rushing past her door.

“No! This is the last straw, we can’t let this keep happening!” Larry stomped past her door and stopped.

Larry’s knuckles rapped curtly on Connor’s door, rattling Zoe’s own door with their force. Larry didn’t wait for a response, the door creaking open as he swept into Connor’s room without permission.

“Connor,” Larry said sharply.

Zoe could imagine it, Connor lounging on his bed, reading a book or a magazine, or on his laptop, peering over the top of it with hooded, judging eyes. Zoe groaned quietly, shuffling under her covers, hoping she could silence the brewing argument. With both her parents at Connor’s door, there was no way for her to sneak out. She was effectively trapped in this room, listening to her family yelling over her head.

“You missed your appointment,” Larry continued.

There’s a beat, where Connor likely gave any number of his nonverbal responses: a listless shrug, a pointed roll of his eyes, or just a blank stare. Larry huffed a sigh, already aggravated at this one sided conversation.

“We talked about this,” Larry said through gritted teeth.

“I’m sure he just forgot,” Cynthia tried, voice strained. “It was my fault, I’ll be sure to take him next time.”

“You will,” Larry agreed. “Because we’re taking away your car until you’ve shown some responsibility.”

“That’s not fair!” Connor finally said.

“Larry, please!” Cynthia begged.

“It *is* fair,” Larry’s voice was curt, leaving no room for argument. “This was the compromise we agreed on.” Zoe imagined the sharp jut of Larry’s jaw, the furrow in his angered brow. “I wanted to take your car away after we caught you high. But we *compromised*,” he stressed the word, trying to remind his wife that he’d done what she asked, that he’d bent instead of breaking and it hadn’t worked. “And agreed that if you went to *therapy* you could keep the car.”

“I never agreed to see a fucking shrink!” Connor yelled.

“You don’t have to *agree*, but while you’re living in this house there are *consequences* to breaking rules.” Larry was doing his best to keep his voice level, to be the voice of reason amidst Connor’s and Cynthia’s pleas.

“It’s just one appointment,” Cynthia reasoned. “Things like this are a *process*.”

“And from now on, your *mother* will take you until you’ve earned it back.”



“Jesus christ, I’ll *go* if it’s that important to you,” Connor spat.

“It’s supposed to be important to *you*,” Larry said, voice run ragged. “Connor, we have tried *everything* with you—”

For the first time Larry’s hard exterior broke, the wall crumbling down to reveal the scared man within. The father just trying to do his best for his children, trying and trying and scrabbling blindly in the dirt for an answer that wasn’t there, but still trying all the same.

“I’m sorry I’m not just a *problem* you can fix!” Connor yelled. “Why don’t you just send me to rehab again because you’re tired of dealing with me?”

“Connor.” Cynthia’s voice dripped with unshed tears, and Zoe can see her face crumpling. “We’re trying to *help* you...”

“I don’t need your fucking help!” Connor screamed.

Zoe could feel his anger shaking the bones of this old house, seeping into her room like poison. It ignited something in her too, that anger she kept locked inside. Why couldn’t he see they were just trying to help him? Why could he just *do* what their parents asked for *once*? Why couldn’t their parents see he was a lost cause?

But more than anything, Zoe was scared. Terrified that Connor’s anger would finally explode, taking their whole family with it. She wanted to get her headphones and listen to some music to drone out their yelling. But her headphones were on the other side of the room, and she feared if she got up, Connor would hear her, and then his anger would turn on her.

So she pulled the blankets over her head instead, burrowing into the ground like prey.

“You will not speak to your mother like that!”

“What are you going to do? Just keep taking things away and make my life *more* miserable?”

“If that’s what it takes to make you—”

“Let’s just calm down,” Cynthia pleaded.

“Make me what?” Connor growled. “Normal? Perfect? Like *Zoe*?”

“This isn’t about your sister,” Larry said, tone warning.

“It never is! It’s always about *me*, and all the ways I’ve disappointed you!”

“Sweetie, you haven’t disappointed us,” Cynthia tried to cut in.

“We wouldn’t have to if you would just *listen*!”

“Then say something worth listening to!” Connor shouted. “Instead of just ‘*Connor, stop being such a fuck up,*’ or ‘*Connor, be more like your sister.*’”

“Whenever we try to talk to you, you shut us out,” Cynthia said gently.

“Because I *don't like you!*”

Cynthia made a noise like a wounded animal, as the house once more fell into silence.

“Well.” Zoe can see the steel set to Larry’s jaw, eyes a dark swirl of anger. “You don’t have to *like us* to follow our rules.”

The door closed, and a twin set of footsteps receded. The house’s silence was more deafening than any argument.

A month later Connor killed himself.

---

“I don’t like you,” Zoe says, the words heavy on her tongue.

Across from her, Connor’s eyes shift, brown, blue, hazel, before settling on that familiar twinkle of mirth. “Is this a confession?” He leans in, across the table like they’re sharing a secret.

Zoe shakes her head. “That’s what you said to us. Or to mom and dad.”

Connor leans back, lips settling into a thin line. “So?” he shrugs. “I didn’t like anyone.

“I know.” Zoe watches him, trying to emulate that same piercing stare she’s received so many times.

What she didn’t realize until now, what none of them realized, was that Connor never dared to let anyone past his walls.

“Did you really mean it?” Zoe asks, knowing it’s pointless.

The Connor across from her, the bits and pieces of a boy she never knew, can’t give her the answer she wants. He can parrot her questions back at her, he can tell her what she *wants* to hear. But he can’t tell her the truth, what Connor really felt in the months, and weeks, and days before he took his own life.

Those died with Connor.

And just as she knew he would, her memory of Connor smiles that jester’s smile, wide and all teeth like an animal about to strike. “I don’t know, Zoe.” His eyes twinkle, like he delights in torturing her. “I’m not the person who said it.”

Zoe nods, because she knew that answer was coming, could hear the distorted memory of Connor’s voice say the words before the ghost across from her opened his mouth.

“And I’ll never know,” Zoe says flatly, looking past Connor to the open window where the blank, empty sky shines through.

“Hey, you’re starting to get the hang of it!” Connor says with a whisper of pride.

It sounds artificial to Zoe’s ear. She can’t remember a time that Connor was ever proud of her, can’t imagine what his voice would sound like infused with pride. And she’ll never know, because Connor took that knowledge with him when he died, all those infinite possibilities, all those worlds where Zoe lived to hear pride in his words.

That’s the worst part.

“Why did you push us all away?” Zoe asks, unsure if she’s asking anyone at all.

“Did you really try that hard to reach me?”

“We *did!*” Zoe says, desperate to believe it. “We fucked up, and we weren’t perfect but we *tried!*”

When the truth came out, the worst part was learning that Connor hadn’t left a note. She’d built up this image of her brother, this memory of a person who’d never existed, and thought that maybe she finally understood him. He was a boy who felt lost, swimming under the weight of a loneliness he couldn’t manage, and he’d loved his sister, even if he’d never had the courage to tell her.

But that Connor was as fake as the one sitting across from her now. They would never know why Connor killed himself. The *real* Connor hadn’t left them any words to cling to in their grief. Maybe that in itself said all that needed to be said. The real Connor left them, and didn’t even bother to tell them why.

“I guess trying wasn’t enough,” Connor says simply.

And that guts Zoe to her core.

Because as much as they tried to reach out to Connor, it would never mean anything if he didn’t reach back, or if when he finally *did*, they’d given up and closed their hearts to him.

Trying *wasn’t* enough. They had all tried, and they’d all failed. And maybe if they could go back and do it again, knowing what they know now, they could save Connor. They could hold out a hand to him, in that *perfect* way he needed to hear, and he would place his hand in theirs, and they could *fix* their mistakes.

But maybe they wouldn’t. They could reach out and beg for Connor to take their hand, to *please*, just let us *help* you, and none of it would matter. Because Connor wouldn’t reach back.

“I wish it was,” Zoe sobs. “I wish one of us had said what you needed to hear. I wish everything was different.”

“Wish all you want. It won’t change a thing.” Connor watches her with placid, unmoving green, hazel, blue eyes. “Because I *left* you.”

“*You* left me,” Zoe bites through her sobs.

Connor's eyes soften, almost gentle, and when he speaks, his voice is barely a whisper. "I left you."

---

Even with the medicine, things are still difficult in a way Zoe had never understood before. Her anger, though dulled, still pokes through. Sometimes she just wants to curl in her bed and lay there. The world buzzes like the static on a TV screen, and she knows if she gets up, she's going to burst apart at the seams.

She hates her younger self for not understanding. That she expected medicine and therapy to *fix* her brother when it was their whole family that was broken. She's lucky enough to have that now, medicine and therapy and a family that loves her. That in itself makes her angry.

She understands now, five years too late, with a brother that's dead and buried.

She knows it's useless to ponder the *what ifs*, to imagine the future she could have written if only she'd *understood*. But Zoe's mind doesn't belong entirely to her. It belongs to that world she sees in her dreams, to the Connor that sits across from her in her mother's kitchen, and to all the infinite mistakes she's made.

Even if Larry puts in more effort to spend time with his children than he used to, he and Zoe still don't have that much in common. He takes her to the movies, to dinner and they struggle to find common ground over burgers and fries. But he's trying, and Zoe is trying to grasp his outstretched hand in turn.

Zoe chews listlessly on a fry, Larry struggling to hold up a one-sided conversation. "I thought the movie was pretty interesting." Zoe hums noncommittally. "That one actor, he was in that other movie..." Larry trails off, waiting for Zoe to fill in the blanks, to meet him halfway.

But even halfway is too much work right now, and Zoe slumps against the table under the weight of all the worlds Connor sundered. Before, Larry would let the conversation lull into silence, pay the bill when they were done, and drive them back to a home that was caving inward under the weight of all the things left unsaid. But Larry is *trying*, he's *trying* to learn from his mistakes and be a better version of himself.

He chooses not to crack under the weight of his grief. Larry makes that choice every morning when he wakes up. He chooses to be better; for Cynthia, for Zoe, for the son he couldn't save.

And that choice lies in the little moments, in reaching out instead of shutting down. "What's wrong, sweetheart?"

What Zoe doesn't know, is that the endearment sticks in Larry's throat every time he says it. It's awkward and heavy on his tongue, and it sounds strange hanging in the air between them. But he chooses to say it anyway, because he wants his affections known. He never wants Zoe to go a day, an hour, a *moment*, without knowing how dear she is to him.

Zoe meets her father's eyes, and words pour from her mouth unbidden. "I've been seeing a doctor at school," she admits, gaze falling to her hands in her lap. "A... a therapist. I've been

trying this... this medication?"

Larry's knife clatters to the floor. Zoe glances up, through her lashes, to gauge his expression. His face is pinched, tight with something she can't name, brow furrowed the way Connor's does in her dreams.

"M-medication?" he stammers.

Zoe flinches at the sound of his voice. She nods, all her words knotted on her tongue.

"Zoe, I..." Larry's eyes flash with a panic Zoe hasn't seen since that dreadful night when Connor died, and their lives forever changed. "Are you okay?"

Larry reaches out, hand grasping for Zoe and finding her shoulder. He squeezes, trying to make sure she's solid and *real*. His eyes shine with tears threatening to overflow. *He's scared, Zoe realizes, scared of losing me.*

She offers Larry a gentle smile. "I'm fine," she promises. "It just... It helps to talk about things. Makes it... easier to deal with."

She knows Larry doesn't get it. He'd never understood therapy, questioned if it was really the best thing for Connor even as he paid the bill week after week. Considering where they were, maybe it hadn't been. Or maybe all the help in the world could never reach someone who doesn't want to be helped.

"Okay, okay." Larry squeezes her shoulder again, brow smoothing even as he searches Zoe's eyes. "You'd tell us if you were hurting?"

Zoe sees the scars the Larry bears, recognizes them as her own. She reaches up, grasping her father's hand on her shoulder. She entwines their fingers and squeezes his hand.

"I would," she promises.

Zoe meets her father's eyes, and knows she can never hurt them the way Connor already has.

---

Zoe sits in the familiar warm space of her mother's kitchen, watching the edges of Connor bleed into the background. No matter how hard she tries to capture that smile, the memory of his eyes looking into hers, the memories slip through her hands like fog. If only she could freeze this moment, Connor smiling in their childhood home, a halo of gold lighting his hair.

She wants to hold onto it, decades from now, when the years without Connor outnumber the ones he lived. She wants to hold on, to remind herself what it meant to be Connor's sister.

"Why do you keep coming back here?" Connor finally asks. He ripples like water beneath Zoe's stare. "You know I'm not him."

He says that as if Zoe has a choice. It's not as if Zoe goes to bed every night and *chooses* to construct this memory of her mother's kitchen. She doesn't *choose* to fill it with the echo of someone she dearly wants to talk to but can never reach.

But then again, if Zoe *did* have a choice, she doesn't know that she would choose differently.

"I'm not ready to let go you go."

The admission hangs heavy in the air, Zoe's eyes searching, searching for some piece of Connor that she can hold onto. She wants to reach out, to touch Connor's shoulder the way their father had grasped hers, to *squeeze* and see that Connor is *solid* and *real*.

But she's so afraid that she'll reach and he'll flow through her fingers like water.

"You know you have to," Connor finally says.

"But I *didn't*!" Zoe growls through gnashing teeth. "I didn't have to let go of you! No one did! We could have had you for the rest of our lives!"

She doesn't know how to forgive Connor for taking that away from her. That anger, that resentment, keeps her trapped here. It threatens to consume her, every day, no matter how hard she tries to let go. It's the barb around her heart, the words she cages and locks away so that no one will ever see the ugliness she and her brother shared.

"Do you really believe that?"

"*Yes!*" Zoe screams, begging for Connor, the *real* Connor, to hear her. "I've *seen* it!"

Every dream, where Connor lives at her side, unhappy but *life* thrumming in his veins carries a beautiful, unspoken *hope*. Hope for future happiness that may never come, but hope all the same. Her Connor took that hope and swallowed it with a bottle of pills. Poisoned it like he poisoned himself.

Zoe wants so badly to hope again.

"Because what you've *seen* is so promising," Connor scoffs.

"It *is* because you're *there!*" Zoe fights the urge to grab Connor by his shoulders and *shake* him until he *finally* understands her for once in their lives. "Even if we're not happy, it's better because we *could* be!" She pauses, throat raw, to take a gasping breath. "If you're dead, you will *never* be happy."

Connor leans back, watching her with a blank expression. "All those years, *waiting* for a happiness that might never come..." Connor shakes his head, dark hair falling into his eyes. "Did you ever think that's what he was trying to avoid?"

She has. Of course she has. She's considered every possible reason Connor might have killed himself and never come any closer to an answer.

"You keep talking about what *you* 've seen and what *you* feel," Connor continues. "But what about the fact that he just didn't want to live anymore?"

When he meets her eyes, they're dark, hollow, and empty in a way that Zoe can only reach on her worst days. She knows now, in a way she never did then, just how exhausting the weight

of living is, how daunting the march of time. A whole world rests on Connor's shoulders, and Zoe wishes she could share those burdens, that he could take some of hers in turn. She never wanted to before. Five years too late, she wants to know Connor and be known.

"Were you really ready to let us go?" Zoe asks, voice fragile like a thin pane of glass.

Connor averts his eyes. "I didn't have to be." His eyes shift, hazel, blue, green, as he stares into the far distance. "I got to die."

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Connor slumps over the kitchen table of their childhood home, head pillowed on his arms. His hair spills over the table like flowing water, the blue highlights shining gold in the shower of light. He wears all of his twenty-two years in the lines on his face, in the fading scars on his arms, in sharp edges softened by time.

Zoe has been here so many times, in the waking world and her dreams. She's seen so many different versions of Connor, she's starting to forget which parts are real, and which parts she's filled in herself. They've danced to this tune so many times, where Zoe will grab the milk and breeze out, content to pretend that Connor doesn't exist. She'll let their lives play out in parallel and be content to never cross paths.

(Zoe *screams* and *screams* but she's never heard. She tears at the barbs around her throat, uncaring as they dig into the flesh of her palms.

*Say something*, she begs. As she watches Connor bleed into the background, worn away by the inevitable march of time, she knows each time might be the last. *Tell him what I can't!*)

Zoe brushes past, eyes glazing over Connor like he isn't even there.

(Zoe rails against the prison of her own flesh. She's always pretending, pretending Connor's gone, pretending he's *here*. For once she just wants to meet him in the middle. To reach for Connor and grasp his hand in turn.)

Zoe stops in her tracks, makes an aborted glance at the shell of her brother.

(Bloody hands tear at the walls Zoe's built, dragging barbs across brick and mortar, gouging out crumbling clay with broken nails.

*Please*. The wall cracks beneath desperate hands. Light streams in, day breaking over a heart that hasn't seen sunlight in years. *Just let me reach him.*)

Zoe, the Zoe who lost Connor, who has judged her past, present, and future mistakes, finally finds her voice.

"Connor." Her voice cracks, mouth dry, like she hasn't spoken in years. "Are you okay?"

She turns to face him, meeting one green, brown, blue eye staring at her from behind the curtain of Connor's hair. He watches her, and she stands firm, struggling not to wince under the weight of his gaze. She's not afraid of him anymore. She has nothing to fear.

“What do you care?” Connor grumbles, voice a bitter freezing wind, the kind Connor always loved.

Zoe’s tongue sticks to the roof of her mouth. She needs to find *words*, the *right* words, to reach Connor the way none had before. She’s reaching out her hand and she needs to make him reach back.

“I... I *do*,” she insists, mouth sticky. “I’m your *sister*,” she says like that means *anything*.

Connor head rises from the table, eyes narrowing, piercing Zoe’s skin like needles. “What are you *doing*?” he hisses, like a snake prepared to strike.

Like an animal backed into a corner. Zoe steels herself, stills her shaking hands. “I just... I want you to know that I care...”

Connor stands up, chair scraping against the cedar floor. At his full height, he towers over Zoe, in a way she had forgotten. His chest and shoulders are broader than her Connor’s ever were, and the fury in his eyes sets her skin alight with paralyzing fear.

“When have you ever *cared*?” he spits, stalking towards her. She’s too scared to even *move*.

“I... I *always* cared!” Zoe stammers, trying to grasp all the words she’d imagined, all the eloquent fantasies of what she’d say to Connor if she could. But her mind is blank and her hands come away empty. “I just... I just didn’t know how to say it.”

“Right.” Connor’s lip curls into a sneer. “You care *so much* about your *dumbass*, *useless*—”

“Connor, I... I didn’t mean it!” Zoe screams, but Connor’s anger is a void that swallows her words whole.

“—*fuck up* of a brother!” His words are the roar in Zoe’s ears, the thrum of static in her veins.

“I’m sorry!” Zoe shrieked. “I was hurting and I took it out on you...” The way Connor always took it out on her. “... but I *did* care! I *do*!”

“You only care when it’s convenient for you!” Connor flings out his arms, and Zoe flinches, preparing for a strike that never comes. “When you can pity me and make yourself feel better!”

The worst part is the truth in his words. Zoe had never cared about Connor until he died, had never wanted him until he was gone, until it was easy to mourn what could have been without facing the ugly reality of what *was*.

“I want to...” Zoe gasps through her tears. “I want to be better!”

She does, so strongly it *aches*. She wants to learn and grow and be a better version of herself, for her family, for Connor, for everyone she loves. She thought she was.

“*Fuck you!*” Connor roars, so close Zoe can feel his breath on her cheek, and her legs quake under her weight. “I’m not here to make *you* better!”



He whirls away, and Zoe *knows* that if he walks away she'll never see him again. She needs to *say* something. She needs to say *something*, but all the words choke her, fumbling on her too heavy tongue. She's going to *lose* him, after she fought so hard and long for this second chance, she's going to *waste* it.

This is why she never reached out, why she never tried during all the long years she watched Connor suffer, why the Zoe in her dreams never reached out. Because she knew Connor, she knew he would throw it back in her face, with all her past mistakes, all the nasty, horrible, vile parts of her she tried to hide.

Because she was a coward, and trying to fix things meant fixing the ugliness inside her, and she'd never been ready for that.

Her fear of losing Connor for the final time, watching him turn away and not knowing if she'll ever see him again, awakens that ugliness now. That adrenaline boils inside her, until fear has rubbed her raw and all that's left is *anger*, that white-hot rage she swallows every day. It breaks the lock on that cage locked around her heart, and all the anger she and Connor share comes pouring out.

"Why do you always do *this*?" she screams, voice raw and bleeding. "Why do you push us away?"

Connor stops. His back still turned to her, shoulders tense, shaking with rage. But he's listening, or at least, Zoe hopes he is. Tears blur her vision, blurring Connor where he's already fading. If she blinks, she's certain he'll disappear.

"Why won't you let us *help* you?"

"What makes you think I *want* to be helped?" Connor says, voice level and even.

Where Connor's voice is calm, Zoe's is a tortured scream, *begging* for someone forever out of reach to *please*, just listen. "I know you don't *want* to be helped, but you *deserve* it!"

Connor's shoulders shake, and whether it's with anger or tears, Zoe will never know.

"You deserved to *live* and *be happy* and read those stupid pretentious books you liked so much!" Zoe clutches at her chest, where the barbs twist like a knife. "You took that away from us, but you took it away from *yourself*, too, and I fucking *hate* you for it!"

Zoe steps forward, reaching out across that insurmountable gap that's laid between them for over twenty years. Connor doesn't move. For the first time in her life he *stays*.

"You lived almost twenty years, and the best thing you ever did was *die*." Zoe grasps Connor's shoulder. "You deserved to do so much *more*."

He slips through her hold like water.

He flickers out like a burning candle, as Zoe desperately tries to grasp the smoke left behind. "No, no!" she cries, scrabbling for his hands and coming away empty. "Don't leave me again! I'm not ready!"

He blurs like a picture out of focus, until it's impossible to tell where Connor ends and the world begins. The world snaps back into focus, and Zoe stand in an empty kitchen, like he was never there at all.

Zoe crumples to the ground, hands folding into her chest, where her hearts lays bare. A primal scream ripped from the bloody hollow in her chest shakes the earth. The four walls pulled from Zoe's memory rattle, threaten to bleed into that golden light streaming through the window. Zoe screams into the floor, knees tucked under herself. She curls inward, protecting the heart that screams in her chest.

She tore down her walls, she reached out her hand, she did everything *right*. Connor was still gone. She was still alone, her soul laid bare with nothing to show for it. She tried to grasp a memory in her hands and came up empty.

"He was *here*, he was *here*," she gasps. "I don't want to forget!"

She sobs, tears dripping down her lashes onto the solid ground. An insufferable silence meets her cries, the same silence that's suffocated her for over twenty years, *her* silence that left Connor to drown. She cries until she doesn't have any tears left, cries for the brother she lost, the family he never had, and the life they should have lived.

Her sobs turn to hiccups, soul rubbed raw by the weight of her grief, until she doesn't even have the energy to feel sorrow. She just feels *exhausted*. She lays there, curled in on herself, forehead pressed to the cool ground while her grief bleeds from her eyes. She shakes, all the broken pieces that Connor left behind rattling inside her.

She stops shaking, she starts to breathe again, lips chapped and red.

The weight of a hand falls on her shoulder. "Zoe."

Zoe's snaps to attention, head spinning, vision going black at the edges, and looks up to Connor. *Her* Connor, just as he was the day before he died; seventeen, all sharp angles and lanky limbs, and *so, so* young. He kneels beside her, long, untamed hair falling into his eyes as he stoops over to rest his hand on her shoulder.

Zoe covers Connor's hand with hers, feeling the sharp jut of his knuckles scratching against her palm, and he's *real, real, real*. Before she has a chance to think, she grabs Connor's arm and pulls him down to the floor.

"What the hell are you—"

Zoe wraps him in a crushing hug, holding Connor tight to her chest, prepared to hold on forever, if that's what it takes. Connor stiffens in her arms. Zoe can't remember the last time Connor hugged her before he died, if he ever did. Even if he had, it wouldn't be like this.

Connor awkwardly winds his gangly, untamed limbs around Zoe's shoulders, returning her embrace. "Hey, Zoe."

Zoe pulls back to look at Connor's clear, unoccluded face for the first time in *years*. "I thought you were gone for good."

The corner of Connor's mouth ticks into a smile. And God, how could she have forgotten what that looked like? "When did you become a sappy piece of shit?"

Zoe thinks of the span of years that separate them, all the years that Connor missed. Zoe is twenty-one, an adult now, fully grown if not matured. Connor in her arms is *seventeen*, just a *boy*. Zoe has known for years that she was older than Connor lived to be. But as an *adult*, for the first time she *understands*.

"Oh God," Zoe gasps, reaching up to cup Connor's face in her hands, his cheekbones sharp and gaunt. "You're so *young*."

Connor scowls and bats her hands away. "Can we not do this?"

"I'm sorry," Zoe blurts out. "For everything I said, for not making it right."

Connor meets her eyes, his gaze piercing and blue, blue, *blue*, how could she forget they were *blue*? "I know."

"And that no one was there for you. That you felt so alone."

"Okay."

"And—"

"Zoe," Connor cuts her off, placing a hand (warm, and solid, and *real*) on her arm. "It's okay."

"But I made so many mistakes." Zoe holds onto him with an iron grasp, scared to let go. "We *all* made so many mistakes."

"And I didn't?" Connor laughs, and his voice sounds so nice when he laughs. "You don't have to hold onto that grief just because I killed myself."

"Just watch me." Zoe sticks out her tongue at Connor.

He laughs again, and it's almost like when they were children, before they drifted apart. "I don't *want* you to."

Zoe searches his face, etches the curve of his brow, the line of his jaw, the color of his eyes to memory, she'll hold onto him as long as she can.

"I'm still dreaming, aren't I?" She wraps a lock of Connor's hair around her finger, wondering if a dream could feel this *real*. "You're just my imagination of Connor, telling me what I want to hear."

Connor meets her eyes, unblinking. "Does it matter?" He shrugs. "This feels real enough, doesn't it?"

Zoe sighs in exasperation. “That sure sounds like some pretentious bullshit Connor would say.”

Connor’s cheeks dimple. “Do you miss me yet?”

Zoe’s smile fades, as she stares into the face of someone she used to be afraid of. “I don’t know,” she admits. “But you deserved to live. Even if we weren’t happy, even if we made each other miserable, you deserved to have a future.”

Connor’s smile fades, his face carefully blank. “Even if I didn’t want it?”

“You deserved to.” Zoe squeezes him gently. She doesn’t know when she became the wise older sister. “I wish someone had helped you see it.”

Tears bead on Connor’s lashes, his lip trembling, just like Zoe’s does on the verge of tears. “Yeah,” he laughs wetly. “Me, too.”

Then his face crumples, just like their mother’s. He chokes out a sob, burying his face in Zoe’s neck, blinking wet butterfly kisses into her skin. Zoe holds him tighter, crushing his body to hers as his whole body shakes with a force it can’t possibly contain.

“I’m sorry,” Zoe murmurs into Connor’s hair, rocking him in time with his sobs. “That you had to die for me to be happy.” Connor shivers in her arms, and she fears he’ll break apart, and leave her with nothing but smoke.

“I hope there’s a world out there where you’re happy.” Zoe’s words stick in her throat. “Even if it’s not with me. I hope you’re happy.”

“Okay,” Connor gasps into her neck, and she can hear the smile in his voice. “I hope so, too.”

Zoe continues to hold him, trying to grasp smoke in her hands even as it fades. Connor pulls back, wiping his nose on the sleeve of the black hoodie he’d died in. His eyes are rimmed red, nose and cheeks chapped. He blurs at the edges, haloed by golden light. When he smiles, it’s a frail, sad thing.

“I think, I could’ve been happy with you,” he snuffles, as his colors bleed into the background.

Zoe meets his blue, blue, blue eyes through the fog of tears. “Yeah.” She grasps his hand, memorizes the feel of his fingers wrapped in her own. “I think I could’ve been happy with you, too.”

This time, when Connor fades away, it’s in Zoe’s arms. Neither of them are alone.

---

Zoe wakes up.

Zoe wakes up every day, and she chooses to hope.



## End Notes

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