

**same nails, new manicure**

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# same nails, new manicure

by [kazqedglitzr](#)

## Summary

Connor is alive, and then he isn't, and then she really, really is.

(or, 5 conversations zoe murphy had with her sibling after the suicide attempt. the connie murphy agenda will rise!)

## Notes

i said to myself hmmm i wonder if there are any trans girl connor murphy fics in the trans connor murphy tag. and there werent. so this is my contribution. (will smith holding arms out meme)

this is the first time ive ever finished a deh fic i guess! moon knight subscribers i promise i'll get back to the knights soon i just have a lot of projects going so in the meantime if you like deh then enjoy!

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

Connor is alive.

This is the first thing that Zoe is told when she manages to get on the phone with her father at lunch break. She's been stressing about it all goddamn morning, worrying her lip until it splits under an incisor and she starts licking at the wound subconsciously through English Lit, wringing her hands and tapping her feet and generally going fucking out of her mind about the whole thing until she finally has a chance to dash out of the classroom, find a quiet spot behind the math department, and get on the line with her parents, because god knows they don't text. Connor is alive and in the hospital, and although his bloodstream is full to bursting with pretty much anything he could find in the medicine cabinet at three o'clock in the morning, he will probably make it out okay in a week or two.

Zoe does not like to think of herself as a particularly doting sister. She still cries in a bathroom stall until she's late for Home Ec.

Because - Connor's an asshole, you know? Connor is frightening and Connor is enigmatic and Connor is dangerous. Connor has been to rehab once and the psych ward twice. Connor has made six threats about killing her since January and at least half of them were credible.

But if Connor was dead... She doesn't think that that would be the thing to make her happy, is what it comes down to.

(Maybe in another life, Connor dies, and Zoe keeps her head held high and refuses to mourn him. Maybe there's a world where he got to the pills a little earlier, where instead of Zoe walking in on his unconscious form, she found him dead already, or bleeding from a fall, or cuts, or she didn't find him at all and it was Mom, or -)

Zoe takes a deep breath and reintroduces herself to the school day. She is marked absent for Home Ec, which is dumb, because she's right there, but she doubts that her parents are going to care much about that. Because Connor is alive.

Dad picks her up out of the gate. (She's skipping band practice. They can deal.) Just like every time, he gestures at the front seat and goes, "Why don't you ride shotgun for once, huh?"

“No thanks, Dad.” He complains when she goes on her phone in the car, never mind the fact that she hasn’t had motion sickness since she was, like, eleven. Besides, she likes the side-on view of the steering wheel; it helps her keep a better profile on him. Her dad is kind of a road rager - not the roll the windows down and swear kind, just the loud declarations of what these people *should* be doing on the road kind. And her mom has always kind of hated driving anyway, even driving the fancy-but-outdated sports car that her dad bought when they were younger and he was just about to crest a premature mid-life crisis, so it’s kind of her seat in Zoe’s mind anyway. Connor gets the side behind the driver’s seat and Zoe gets the diagonal. It’s like the seats at the dinner table - they’re not *assigned*, per se, but if she’d tried to sit in Connor’s spot she’s pretty sure she would have been stabbed, so they’re permanent nonetheless.

“It’s a free country!”

“Yeah, and I’m using my freedom to sit where I want.” She slings her backpack across the middle seat. He’s driving before she’s buckled.

As they pass trees and lampposts and endless suburban sprawl, making their gradual way uptown to the general hospital, Zoe’s eyes flick from focus to focus over and over again outside the window until they glaze over and stop moving altogether, the landscape blurring into green and brown and white homogeneity. Her phone buzzes and it takes her a couple of seconds to check it - it’s a Snapchat from one of the girls in band. She shuts the phone off.

Parking goes uneventfully, if punctuated with some frustrated muttering from her dad (but when does he not do that), and then they’re in reception, and then they’re in the waiting room, and a few nervously-charged minutes of Subway Surfers later the name *Murphy* is being called, and with the squeak of her sneakers on hospital tile Zoe marks her arrival in Connor’s hospital room.

It’s quiet. It’s white, it’s clean.

They’ve washed Connor’s hair.

“Glad *somebody* finally cleaned that boy up,” her dad comments. “Now if only they could give him a trim as well.”

“It’s weird,” she says, instead of pointing out that Connor has been working on growing his hair out for the best part of the summer, and if her dad chopped it all off like he definitely wants to then he’d probably be dead on sight when Connor woke up. “Seeing him like this.”

“What, sitting still?”

“Yeah.” *No. It’s - he looks... peaceful.* Sure, there’s a drip in his arm and a tube in his nose (a cannula, some distant part of her that briefly entertained the notion of going to med school back in freshman year reminds her), but his breathing is steady and deep, and his eyes are shut so gently. Zoe has seen Connor sleep before, but it’s never been for long, because most of the time she’s barging in on him in an attempt to get him up and moving before they miss the bus. That and... this morning, which was a very different story. This *feels* new, at least.

“I’ll have to ask them how they did it, huh? We could use a little bit of this every now and again.”

“Do we know when he’s gonna wake up?”

“I don’t think so, sweetie. You never can tell, with things like these.”

“Right.” Zoe swallows and moves closer to her sleeping brother. (Comatose is a big word.) From here she can see so much that she hasn’t been close enough to make out on a good day in years. Freckles, which have pretty much faded on her own skin by the start of the semester, but which apparently stick around on Connor at least this far into the fall. His skin is clearer than hers, which she guesses makes sense, because he’s a year further out of puberty hell, but it’s still a little frustrating given the amount of time she spends in front of mirrors about it. (Which is just as well, given that Connor tends to avoid mirrors like the plague.) It’s hard to pick out a feature that they’ve both inherited. They have the same ears, she decides.

“Do you - do you need a minute?” asks her dad, a fair amount quieter. It’s as if, now that the silence has settled like a dusty cloth across the room, he’s afraid to step on it and pull down

the atmosphere by its corner.

“Do you?”

“I’m fine, sweetie. You’ve probably got homework or something anyway, huh? I can always come back later. And your mother’s all alone in the house right now - I brought her by this morning, but she’s probably stressing out at home - she could do with a call.”

“Alright,” Zoe says slowly. Her dad has closed the door and disappeared around the corner before she has a chance to tell him goodbye.

There is a chair set out. It’s probably where her mom was sitting earlier. Zoe pushes it back so she won’t be positioned so uncomfortably close to the bed, and then sits down next to Connor.

“Hi,” she opens.

Connor doesn’t move, except to take another breath. It feels like there should be beeping, or something, but there’s just the distant bustle of the rest of the hospital outside, and the sound of both of their breathing.

“I’m still mad at you, you know,” she continues. “For finishing the milk yesterday. I had to have my coffee with mom’s hemp milk. You know I hate that shit.”

It feels kind of stupid to talk to somebody who probably can’t even hear her - but Zoe has heard stories about this kind of stuff, and the sentiment in her heart doesn’t want to take any chances.

“And for pushing that kid. I don’t know what the fuck you thought you were doing, but it *looked* like you were being a dick, and it *sounded* like he was covering for you, so... you better not be, like, actually bullying people. You’re too old for that. Get a grip. When you wake up I’m gonna make you go find that guy and tell him you’re sorry, okay?”

The room remains quiet. A chill runs through her.

“Connor, you can’t *do* things like this. You know that, right? I was - like, we were *all* so worried, all morning, do you know how hard it is to sit through an entire class about As You Like It and *not* tell anybody you’re waiting on a call to find out if your brother died while you were taking notes? Pretty goddamn hard!”

The room darkens - there’s a cloud passing. Connor’s eyelashes flutter.

“Just -” she sighs “- I know Mom and Dad are gonna be shitty about it, because they’re always shitty about it. Don’t let it get to you, okay? And I know that’s easier said than done, so... I don’t know, tell ‘em you won’t speak to them without a lawyer present. You’re smart. You’ll get through this. And you’re a senior, so freedom’s not far away anyway, right?”

If Connor was awake, she imagines he’d be giving her a look, one of those *you are literally the dumbest person alive* looks. As it stands, she’s just sitting in a quiet room and staring at what amounts to little more than the possibility of her brother’s future.

“You’re gonna be fine.” Zoe stands up - half-reaches a hand out, to give him, like, a reassuring pat on the arm or something - thinks better of it.

And then she leaves.

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When they brought Connor in, they removed and stored all of his clothing. This makes sense to Zoe, in a detached sort of way - he was wearing a hospital gown when she saw him, and they had to keep his clothes *somewhere*, right? If Connor had lost that ratty black hoodie he was always wearing, Zoe is sure that there would have been hell to pay.

The key to this information, though, is that they also searched and emptied his pockets, and that the things they found in there were kept in a locked drawer overnight and given back to the Murphy family the next day. There was not a lot of stuff in Connor's pockets: keys, phone, torn-up wallet with too many zips and secret compartments that hid nothing.

But there was also a note.

And the note is kind of crazy.

*Dear Evan Hansen - today is not going to be a good day after all. It's not gonna be a good week, or a good year, because why would it be?*

Zoe stares and stares and stares. Zoe ducks her head when her mom tearfully reads out the part about how *all my hope is pinned on Zoe, who I don't even know, and who doesn't know me*. Zoe chokes back something sour and wonders if she's going to miss the bus by the time they get to *Sincerely, your best and most dearest friend, Me*.

Zoe is asked to talk to Evan Hansen. (*We would*, explains her father, *but I've got to get to work, and you know your mother doesn't like to drive.*)

Zoe steels herself and nods.

She's not... *un* familiar with Evan Hansen. Evan Hansen is a senior, like Connor, and he's spoken to her maybe three or four times in three or four years. Evan Hansen went to her elementary school and her middle school, too, and Evan Hansen came to Connor's birthday parties back when everybody in the class went to everybody's birthday parties, before they all turned twelve and thought better of it.

Evan Hansen is the boy that Connor pushed on Tuesday morning.

Zoe was, before this moment, one hundred percent certain that Connor had never spoken to Evan Hansen before in his life.



Now?

Well... honestly, it's only down to like a solid eighty-five. This doesn't *sound* like Connor.

She's never been more glad to have a vague idea of where Evan Hansen's locker is, though, because that's where Evan's standing when she catches his eye (and the eye of the guy standing next to him, looking as though he would rather be anywhere else) with about five minutes to spare before the first bell. "Hey," she starts, loud enough that it carries over the conversations of everybody else in the hall, but not so loud that it catches anybody else's attention, "Evan."

Evan stares, bug-eyed, between her and his friend. "Hi," he says, after a while.

"I need to talk to you, if that's okay?"

"What, like, alone?"

"I mean, if you don't want to -"

"Oh, please," says Evan's friend, "don't move the conversation. I would literally give my left arm to see this. And you know I get my fair share of use out of that thing."

"Y- *fine*, Jared, you can - I mean," he turns to Zoe, "is there a problem?"

"Kind of. You know my brother Connor? The guy who pushed you before?"

Evan hesitates. (Jared snickers.) "Yeah."

“Well, he’s - he’s in the hospital right now. And when they brought him in, they found this.”

She thrusts it into his hand. Evan unfolds it rapidly, scans the paper - his face pales, like he’s about to be sick.

“So I’m just meant to be asking if you knew anything about-”

“No. No, Connor didn’t write this.” He’s deathly quiet as he says it.

“Okay, good, because I didn’t think that you two -”

“No, he didn’t - it wasn’t - Connor didn’t write this,” Evan repeats helplessly.

Jared rolls his eyes and snatches the piece of paper away, folding it back up. “Here. Look - what my buddy Evan here *means* to say is that it’s *his* letter. Something about a therapy assignment, I don’t know, but he told me about this last night. Connor took it off him in the library. This thing was never meant to see the light of day.”

“Did you read it?” Evan near-whispers.

“Uh - yeah. Yeah, I did.” She processes for a moment. (Jared, still smirking, starts to rub a circle into Evan’s shoulder with his thumb, as Evan vacillates, probably contemplating his own suicide now that he knows Zoe’s read this.) “That’s... weird.”

“You’re telling me,” says Jared, “I’m the one who’s gotta hang out with the guy!”

“But it’s not *him*?”

“No, Connor and I don’t know each other. Oh, my god, did he -”

“He’s gonna be fine,” she promises, convincing herself as much as him. “That’s good, though, I can tell my mom it was a false alarm. Thank you!”

First bell rings, and she turns on her heel to get to homeroom as fast as physically possible. On her way down the corridor, she hears a highly amused Jared cry, “Her *mom*?”

She passes Evan in the hall two more times that day. Both times, he avoids eye contact with the force of a thousand suns. (Not that he’s ever made eye contact with her in the hall before - but now it feels palpable.)

It’s a good story though, and it’s one she tells Connor, when she’s able to get back to the hospital the following afternoon. Her mom, eyes clearly red-rimmed and hair tied back in the world’s messiest ponytail (she doesn’t think she even brushed her hair this morning, from the looks of it), gives her the space to do it.

“I mean, you should’ve seen it,” she laughs, “I thought he was actually gonna cry. You didn’t - did you read - you must have read it, right? Well, shit, no wonder you took it with you. Who wouldn’t?”

He’s been repositioned slightly since her last visit - a byproduct of all the cleaning and turning and reorganising they have to do all the time, she’s sure. It means that Connor’s hand, where before it was upturned and slightly curled, is now lying flat and neat against his torso. (That or her mom has moved it, and left it somewhere prettier.) It makes his nail polish conspicuous under the garish blue-white lights.

Connor had really started getting into nail polish two or three years ago, which was about the time that Zoe began to notice that *her* supply of clear base and top coats was dwindling. She hadn’t snitched, though - if her dad had known, back then... After Connor got out of rehab, he began to give a lot fewer shits what their dad thought, and that was when he’d switched from clear to black. Black is what he’s wearing now; it’s chipped to hell, and the fact that his nails are bitten to shreds clearly isn’t helping. Zoe had, more than once, been frustrated by her own nail-biting habits when she was younger, not least of all because they made painting her nails that much more difficult. Actually, she used to think that the perfect opportunity to grow them out, making sure they’d be untouched, would be if she’d fallen into a coma.

That feels a little rich, now.

“If you want to go back and - and take another crack at Evan, I guess,” she mutters, “I wouldn’t... I mean, I wouldn’t hold it *against* you, but... Don’t bother. It’s not important. I can stay away from creepy guys all by myself, thanks. I’m not a little kid.”

Connor breathes. Zoe finds herself breathing along in sync.

“Look after yourself. Don’t waste any time defending me. You’re gonna have to put up with enough shit when you wake up and mom and dad are trying to figure out if you need to go back to the psych ward - don’t keep my honour on your plate as well.”

As long as he's asleep, Zoe can pretend that this is not the same person who has tried to kill her several times, who barely had a civil conversation with her for the duration of middle school. This comes with some detachment, too - what is her brother if he's not her tormentor, too? Can she really call the body before her her brother without the tension in its brow, the set of its shoulders, the square of its jaw?

She's about to let her mother back in when she hears her talking.

"I've just felt so *lost* recently," Mom is sobbing, "I don't know what to do with my boy. And I thought I might have something to hold on to with that letter, but if it's all a big misunderstanding then -"

"It's gonna be fine, honey. At least we know the truth about it."

"I know, I know. I miss him, Lar."

"You were always his favourite," reassures her dad, and she hears the gentle clap of hand on shoulder through the door. "If anyone's getting through to him, it's gonna be you."

"I hope so."

For a moment, Zoe hangs in the balance. She stands on the threshold; on one side is her brother, unable to defend himself, and on the other she's pressed up against the wall that separates him from his parents. She has a terrible feeling that it's only a matter of time before she topples one way or the other. It's only a matter of time before Connor wakes up. And then, she reckons, nothing will be the same again.

But she can walk this tightrope for a few days more. Just until Connor is back.

Zoe pushes forward to join her parents in the hallway, and pushes her confusions out of her mind.

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They are called at approximately four o'clock in the morning to tell them the news. Zoe hears the voicemail on its third play, when she is dragged out of bed to come for breakfast.

It has been six days, and Connor has woken up.

Only briefly - only for a matter of minutes, and only in the presence of a single nurse - but wakefulness is wakefulness, and it's an almost sure sign of his recovery from here. Zoe goes to school and floats through Chem and Spanish and more English Lit without paying much attention; she sits with her friends at lunch and nods through their conversation in all the right places; she heads out at the end of the day and slips into the back of the car before anyone has the chance to tell her goodbye. (She saw Evan, at one point, but he made a very obvious show of keeping his head down. She's glad to leave things at that.)

"Don't you wanna ride in the front for once?"

"No, Dad," she sighs.

“Come on, it’s a free country!”

The hospital is quiet today. Not that it’s ever, like, a bustling hub of activity, but it feels particularly dead on this cool early-September afternoon. She can hear the distant squeak of uniform-appropriate sneakers, plimsolls on white linoleum, the echo of coughs off of white tile, white white white and spotless and impossible to look at too long without an afterimage of the blankness burning into your retinæ. Her dad walks her mutely to the room, where more white (although it’s a little greyer in here, a little grubbier) and quiet awaits her, and they stare for a moment at Connor.

He’s not awake now. Obviously.

It feels... different, though. Like now that she *knows* he’s on his way back out of the coma she can feel the way his breath lands a little shallower, see some of that perpetual tension creeping back into his body, even though he’s still relaxed and eyes-closed and drip-in like he was a couple days ago when she left. The marks of her mother’s worry have been left in scuff marks on the floor from the eternal chair at the bedside, in a rubber-banded bouquet of wilting wildflowers that she must have pulled together herself on the end table, in the pair of reading glasses that has been hung from the foot of the bed, because they must have dropped while her mom was reading a book or whatever. Her dad stands behind her and makes almost silent dad-ly noises of hesitance - huffing about the whole thing, presumably. Zoe takes a few steps into the bubble and plucks the glasses from the metal frame like it’s going to shock her.

“Do you wanna give these to Mom?”

“Sure,” her dad says, shortly.

Part of Zoe wonders why her mom isn’t skipping pilates. Another part of her knows that it’s probably the only thing she’s done all week that isn’t make dinner or stare at her son’s unconscious body. The more important takeaway from “Cynthia Murphy is currently at a pilates class” is that, when it ends, her dad will be driving across this side of town to pick her mom up, and that will leave Zoe alone in the room with Connor for... like, a while. She’s not super excited for that. The last time she and Connor were alone together was as scary as it ever is, which is to say that while she didn’t directly fear for her life, she *did* fear for the wellbeing of the rest of her day. She can only hope, she supposes, that today doesn’t get any worse when Connor wakes up and sees her sitting there.

Speaking of sitting - after a few more awkward moments with her dad in the doorway, Zoe takes the chair. (She's not about to stand the entire time, is she?) Her dad, still lingering, meets her uncertain eyes.

"What do you do," Zoe asks, "when you come here?"

"Me? Oh, I don't know. Sit with your mother, mostly. Try to support her through this whole mess. She likes to read to him - it's just like when we used to read you two bedtime stories. Except I guess a little more peaceful," he chuckles.

"Yeah?"

"Oh, Connor used to settle down just fine, but you would kick and scream and shout when you realised it was time for bed - we had to let you act the story out at least once a night. That was until you were... four or five. And of course Connor started saying he was too old for bedtime stories about then, you know how kids are, they think they're so grown-up when they get to second grade, can't tell 'em anything different."

"When did I stop getting bedtime stories?"

"Not long after you finally started to shut up and let your mother tell them! I guess she got used to the excitement of you running around, chasing after you... 'S a long time ago, all this. You're a very different girl now. A young woman, really. And Connor... Well, he's not the man I was really... *expecting* he'd become. But he's definitely different, eh?"

Zoe just nods. She really doesn't feel like getting into the whole mess of her father's thoroughly unmet expectations for his son. Several fraught summers of being sent home from soccer or football or volleyball early because of another "temper tantrum" or class-halting outburst have given her enough memories of those rants to last a lifetime. At least he's just kinda glossing over it right now.

“I’m gonna miss you both when you’re at college. I mean, I *assume* Connor’s gonna go to college. Lord knows we saved the money for it - I’d hate to see it go to waste.”

“I don’t know.” She honestly isn’t sure if Connor is interested in further education, but he could just as well spend the rest of his days working the drive-thru window at Del Taco as go to community college, as far as her parents are concerned. Go big or go home.

“You’re doing well at school, though, aren’t you, sweetie? I can see you making it to the big leagues. You wanna go to Harvard or something?”

“Maybe.”

“I guess that’d be a little tight for us. It depends what you’re planning on -”

His phone rings, and in a sweep of urgent distraction he’s pulled away from talk of future obligations and into a conversation with his wife. Zoe is forgotten, and then she is alone, for the most part.

She doesn’t say anything this time.

She doesn’t need to.

It is not *thirty seconds* after their father leaves the room that Connor’s breathing shallows, and his eyelids twitch, and his head moves. And now Connor is awake.

Literally the fucking *moment* Zoe is alone.

“Aah,” he vocalises, probably from catching on the nose cannula from the head movement.



She tenses. “Uh. Hey, Connor. You’re okay.”

He makes another uncomfortable noise, and then his eyes open properly, and the first thing they do is *look at her*. To an outside perspective, that would probably be pretty normal and understandable. To Zoe it feels like a fucking death wish.

“You’re okay,” she says again. Focus. Pretend it’s anybody else. “It’s me, it’s Zoe?”

“Mhm,” mumbles Connor, and some of that tension is creeping back into his face, his jaw, his eyebrows.

She wants to move back. She scoots closer. “You feelin’ alright?”

“Hi.” It’s a croaky voice, probably dehydrated to fuck from exclusively consuming fluids by intravenous drip for a week. “Where’s...”

“Mom just got here, uh, Dad’s picking her up literally right now.”

“Oh.” There is a moment, silent. Processing. “So I have...”

“Up to a minute. She’s gonna be a lot. She’s been freaking out the whole time.”

“Okay.” Connor takes a deep breath, and then a weak hand gestures her even closer. Zoe hesitates and complies. “Zoe.”

“Yeah?”

Connor’s voice is low and paranoid, but confident. “I told myself, if I make it, I’m gonna tell someone. So this is me telling someone.”

Zoe frowns, but doesn't speak. (She'll be glad of it, later.)

"Zoe, I'm a girl."

"What?"

"I'm trans. You don't know what being transgender is? Aren't you some big fuckin' ally or whatever?"

"I'm - I'm literally bi, Connor -"

"Great, so now we've both come out to each other, whoop-de-doo."

"I'm just - so this whole time you've -"

The door flings open.

Zoe launches back, jumpscared by her mother's arrival, and her composure is lost even further in the flurry of Cynthia Murphy's great pilgrimage to the bedside of her newly awakened son - fuck, her - her eldest daughter?

"Connor, my baby boy," she's crying, enforcing her presence in the bubble, a bubble that's now thoroughly shattered under the weight of her loudly announced relief. Zoe's dad is not far behind her, but he makes a much quieter entrance, keeping his distance, holding his breath. "Oh, baby, I can't believe you're awake! I missed you so much, honey."

Connor bristles.

Zoe thinks she understands.

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So it's been another few days, and there's a problem.

Connor is refusing to see anyone but Zoe.

Apparently, her recovery is going absolutely swimmingly, and she's even been able to sit up and eat proper food since they last spoke oh so briefly and yet in such hugely world-rocking circumstances. Zoe received this information through second-hand phone calls, however, because after that initial day where Connor opened her eyes and gave brittle responses to their mother's endless requests for reassurance, she's since put an embargo on having any visitors to the hospital room. Except, as it turns out, her sister.

"You're sure you'll be okay?" her mother asks, holding Zoe's hand in both of hers like she's giving a last farewell before Zoe leaves to fight in the war or whatever the fuck.

"It's the *bus*, Mom. I know how to get the bus."

"But - I mean, if you needed me to drive you -"

"You hate driving."

"But if you needed it!"

"I'll be fine, Mom. Don't worry."

"And don't let your brother put you off. I know you two have fought a lot in your time, but that's just kind of what siblings do, right?" Only child Cynthia Murphy has apparently only

ever had one consistent example of a sibling relationship put in front of her before. That and in fiction, Zoe supposes - the books she'd inherited as a child, *Little Women* and *Little House On The Prairie* and other books that didn't start with *Little*, were full of crazy sibling shit. *Narnia*. Even the *Wimpy Kid* had that hot brother.

"I don't think Connor's gonna be able to do much to me, like, four days out of a coma," she argues.

"Still. It's a complicated thing, right? But I think you'll pull through. Look at your father and your Uncle Bob! Thick as thieves now, aren't they?"

"You could say that." Bob and his wife Jackie are pretty much the one thing their side of the Murphy family have ever agreed upon hating.

In the end, her mother lets her go, and Zoe is able to catch a bus uptown without too much of a struggle. Along the way, she tries to lean her head against the side of the bus and look soulfully out while The Postal Service plays the soundtrack to her teen coming-of-age movie in her AirPods, but the road keeps jostling her and making her bump her temple against the glass, overall ruining the immersion pretty solidly. It's not a bad ride, though. Nobody sits next to her. Now that everybody's home from school it's gonna be pretty quiet for the rest of the day, she reckons.

The process of getting through reception is a little tougher without her dad there to play out the script for her, but before she can really get into the rhythm of tapping out the drums from the Owl City song that's now come on shuffle, they call her up for her visit. Things are a little louder today, and Zoe's not really sure where they're walking until she recognises the room, recognises the door with the scuff mark up one side, reads the familiar number on the wall as she's ushered inside and then left alone with Connor.

"Hey," she says, a little worried that they won't find anything to talk about.

Connor blinks her eyes open and sighs, "Zoe," and now her fears are completely gone, because this really *does* feel like a new person, like the brother who overdosed two weeks ago really did die on his bedroom floor that night and left a frail but *so* much happier-looking girl in his place. "You actually came."

“I wasn’t gonna *not*.”

“Did - did Mom give you shit for it, ‘cause I’m sorry, I just didn’t wanna -”

“No, she was - she told me she would drive, if I needed.”

“God.” Connor scoffs, disbelieving. “She must be desperate.”

“I mean, you’re her kid.”

“Barely.”

“I think that’s kind of the point?”

“What, that I’ve been doing my best to get the fuck out of her life for seventeen years?”

“No, the - like, the *oh, where did my baby go, I’m gonna attempt to re-establish this connection, what do you mean you have opinions now* thing. She still thinks we’re both five. She didn’t think I could get the bus.”

“That’s... that’s Mom, I guess.”

Zoe pauses, and heads for the chair. “She - this was her chair. Last week.”

“Really?”

“While you were sleeping, she’d... I’m pretty sure she was reading to you, at least. I don’t know. That’s another point on the *Mom thinks we’re still five* scoreboard, huh? Bedtime stories?”

“I mean, I like books.”

“You don’t like *her* books.” Another pause, and then: “Do you? Like mom-lit?”

“Well I didn’t give *Fifty Shades* a glowing review, if that’s what you mean,” she rolls her eyes, and Zoe is struck by the glibness of it. She didn’t think Connor could *be* glib.

That’s a sticking point. “Are you gonna pick a new name?”

“Oh, so we’re going straight into it.”

“I can back it up if you want -”

“No, it’s whatever, just give me a second to, like... remind myself. That you know, and it’s fine. Not that I *should* need that time, really, that’s the whole reason I told them I didn’t wanna... Okay. Yeah. Gender.”

“Gender,” Zoe nods sagely.

“And names,” her sister continues, “I guess I’ve thought about it a lot but never come to a conclusion about it? Like, I’ve got a list of top ten books somewhere, and I was gonna make a list of top ten names, but I never... actually picked them out.”

“I get that. There’s a *lot* of fucking names.”

“And more than that it’s like - what would be *me*, y’know? Except then I had to actually think about the whole deal of, if you pick a name you have to really accept that it’s real and it’s not gonna change, and then you have to do something about it or you’re just gonna be sad forever, and doing something about it involves telling people which involves telling Mom and Dad and you know they’re not, like, crazy homophobic, they wouldn’t kick me out, but they’re not *accepting* either, and god knows it’s gonna be a minefield at family reunions or whatever, so I might as well just move out and get disowned, and -” she dissolves into a coughing fit “- and yeah, pretty much. It’s a big deal.”

Zoe nods again, slower. “I get that too. Like, you get a name when you’re a baby, and then it’s like - well, what if it’s a shitty name? What if your parents call you, like, Galadriel Moonchild, and you just have to keep it? And what goes with Murphy, and what would you do if you found the perfect name but it *didn’t* go with Murphy, would you have to pick a new last name?”

“See? It sucks.”

“Yeah.”

“God. Ow.” She rubs at her sternum. “I need to stop talking.”

“Yeah, you probably haven’t said that much in like two weeks, right?”

“I don’t know. Definitely not since I woke up. And before that is...” Her face clouds. “School.”

“You’re gonna milk this for all it’s fuckin’ worth, right? You’re not going back until they have to drag you through the doors?”

“Obviously. I was more thinking - just - some fucking... *dumb* shit happened at school.”

“With Evan Hansen?”

Her sister freezes. “I mean, what do *you* know about it?”

“You pushed him in the morning, and then Friday last week - no, fuck, it was Thursday - last week they found a note in your pocket, and it said Evan Hansen, so Mom made me go ask Evan Hansen about it, and he told me it wasn’t yours, so we let him keep it.”

“Oh.” Her lips press together tightly. “Did he... explain himself?”

“His buddy did. Apparently it was for therapy.”

“Creepy fuckin’ therapy exercise.”

“I know, right?” Zoe’s managed to mostly push it out of her head until now, and she’s not the biggest fan of remembering that Evan Hansen exists. “Did that have anything to do with...?”

“Uh. Not ostensibly. More of a last straw kinda deal, I was just fuckin’ *mad* and somebody told me my hair looked shitty and Dad was getting on my case when I got home and I just -” She stumbles over the magnitude of the admission “- killed myself. I guess.”

“Tried to.”

“Yeah.” The reminder that she’s still alive seems equally sobering. “But I was thinking about it, on my way out, and I realised that it really is just the fucking - it’s *all* ‘cause I’ve been too scared to just stand up and say, yeah, I am trans, and I need to deal with that. I have been *so mad* for so long - ‘cause it was the only way I knew how to live. And I need to get out.”

“Toxic masculinity,” Zoe parrots.

“Sure.”



Zoe shifts in her seat. “If you need help. With anything - I can get them to buy me clothes, or you can put my name on your Amazon packages, or if you want me to try out names, or pronouns, or -”

“We get it. Zoe Murphy, One True Ally.”

“I told you, I’m -”

“Yeah,” she rolls her eyes and lets out another few coughs, “I’m just fucking with you.”

“Asshole.”

“I know,” her sister grins tiredly. Zoe probably shouldn’t be deprecating someone who’s so fresh off the logical extreme result of deprecating herself, she realises.

“But seriously. Whatever you want. Unless it’s like, smuggle hormones across the border for you. I’m not crazy.”

“Gotta be crazy to come here in the first place.”

“I told you - I wasn’t gonna *not* come. If I’m the only person my sister who just got out of a coma wants to see, it would be a huge dick move to just let that go.”

“We could,” she flips the script, quickly and with a sudden shallowness to her voice that hints at something in the back of her throat, “just go with - with Connie. For now. Until I think of one that’s more me.”

“For your name?”

“No, dipshit, for yours.”

“Connie is a nice name. It’s like Steven Universe.”

“I am so glad I never watched that show.”

“What did you do with your childhood?”

“I don’t know, listen to MCR?”

“That’s *worse* -”

“Why are we getting into the cringe argument right now, you’re obviously -”

“So you cry about the damn G note but *I’m* the one who’s cringe -”

“I bet you had a fucking Tumblr account with like eight followers -”

“Like you weren’t the most obvious Reddit-4chan-9gag edgelord teenager -”

“There are a lot of trans communities on Reddit -”

“And there are Nazis on Tumblr -!”

“So you’re a Nazi -?”

“I’m just saying -”

“Shut the fuck up, man,” Connie laughs, and when their eyes meet Zoe feels a smile spreading across her own face in response. When everything else she knows about her sister has been turned completely upside down, the one thing she can be sure of is that they will always fight. Maybe her mother is right - this is just what siblings do, isn’t it?

Speaking of her mother, she can’t help but slip a quiet reference to the subject into their breakfast conversation later in the week, just to see if her mind has changed since they last heard her speak about gay rights. “One of the kids in band is changing his name,” she lies.

“Oh really? How come?”

“He’s trans.”

“In...” Her mother frowns and dips her knife into the marmalade jar. (They have so many crazy preserves in the fridge, most fancy enough to be labelled jams instead of jellies, that Seville orange marmalade actually feels kind of basic this late in the game.) “You know, I don’t really understand this whole thing, but - in what direction? He’s a boy now, or he was a boy before, or...?”

“Like, he’s transitioning to a guy.”

“Hmm.” The knife comes out of the jar and moves to her gluten-free rye toast that’s more nuts than bread. “I don’t see why people can’t just be people. All this stuff about genders and pronouns, some people make it into this whole big issue that they can’t use the bathroom they want to use, but if it’s how you want to live your life, why should we care?”

“Yeah.” Zoe bites her lip around the rebuttals she wants to give, to point out that her mother’s literally talking about *the gay lifestyle*, to argue that the bathroom bills are going to get people killed if they’re clocked in the wrong restroom. This is the best she’s going to get, she decides.

She's just not sure if it will be enough for Connie.

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Connie Murphy is released from hospital after almost another week. Her father signs her out *L. Murphy* and grabs her by the arm to lead her back to the car, and when the bill comes in a few days later he raises his eyebrows and mutters something about how she's *lucky we have an emergency fund set aside*.

It looks to Zoe like Larry thinks it's Connie's fault she needed three weeks of hospital care. Which is kind of counterintuitive, because Connie was aiming for zero hospital care.

The days following her release are fraught. People don't talk much. She stays home from school, because she's smart and she's milking it, which means that until Zoe and later their dad come home for the evening it is just Connie and their mom alone in the house, like, almost all the time. Zoe's nail polish starts going missing again, so she orders more. People, who have started to realise that Zoe is still showing up to school alone, begin spreading rumours about what happened. Most of them are ludicrously far from the truth. A few are unnervingly close.

"Hey, Zoe?" asks a girl she doesn't really recognise, calling across the hall outside her English Lit class.

"Uh, hi?"

"Hi - my name is Alana, I was a friend of your brother's - I mean, I worked with him a couple years ago, at least - I mean, I have fond memories of talking to him."

"Okay?"

“I just wanted to ask if he’s alright? I haven’t seen him around, and he hasn’t been in any of my classes so far this year, but I swear I saw him pass me on the first day of school, so -”

“Connor’s fine,” she interrupts, mouth souring around the deadname even though she knows it’s necessary. “He’s just taking a couple weeks off school for personal reasons.”

“Oh, of course, that’s completely valid! I hope he’s feeling alright,” says Alana, wide-eyed and earnest. “I heard his absence might be due to substance abuse, and that’s a cause that I actually hold very dear to my heart, because -”

“Yeah, everything’s fine. It’s just... Personal.” She gives the stranger a closed-lipped smile and hugs her copy of *As You Like It* closer to her chest. Alana doesn’t seem to be getting it. “Thank you, for your concern. But I think we gotta get to class.”

The school bell rings over Alana’s muddled apologies, over whatever final platitudes she gives before Zoe excuses herself into the classroom and attempts to lose herself in whatever the hell Shakespeare was doing with his life in the 1600s or whenever it was. Today they’re looking at the scene where Rosalind, disguised as a man, pretends to be a caricature of herself so the guy she’s into can practise asking her out. The teacher points out that since women weren’t allowed to be actors at the time, this would have been a man pretending to be a woman pretending to be a man pretending to be a woman. Some kid at the back of the class cracks a joke about his brain exploding, and someone else mumbles something about “traps”. Zoe bites the inside of her lip and suffers through.

From there, it gets better, slowly. There comes a day where Zoe’s halfway out the door, sneaker toe on the driveway, when she hears a shout from behind her that she hadn’t expected to hear again for at least another week - Connie, backpack slung over one shoulder, is apparently following her to the bus stop. She’s in the same ratty black hoodie she’s always worn, but now it looks like it fits a little better around her shoulders. “You’re coming to school?”

“Gave up on staying home. I mean - I think Mom was gonna start asking questions if I didn’t.”

“I guess. And Dad’s definitely been making freeloader comments behind our backs for weeks at this point.”

“I’m gonna freeload as much as I damn well please, thanks,” says Connie, picking up the pace to walk beside Zoe as they head for the end of the street. Zoe realises that it’s the first time her sister has actually chosen to walk next to her instead of deliberately trailing behind her since... since, like, forever. As long as she can remember, at least. That’s... crazy.

“Yeah, get your money’s worth.” She can’t help but align herself with the concept of screwing over their parents. “You go, girl.”

“Shut the fuck up, you always do that,” Connie grins.

“What, call you a girl?”

“Yeah! Gender affirming and shit! Why do you do that?”

“It’s not like anybody *else* is gonna?”

“Dad might as well be,” she argues.

“*Might as well* doesn’t keep the gender lights on.”

“The *what*? I don’t get your - your *angle* here!”

“Uh... it’s like, gender’s kinda fake anyway, so I might as well fuck around with the language?”

“Not that fake.”

“I mean, not for *you*, obviously. In my head.”

“So why are you a girl, if gender’s fake for you?”

Luckily, the bus starts closing in, and Zoe can focus on running to catch it rather than trying to find an answer to that question. Connie doesn’t bring it up again. (Which is kind of a relief.)

Time continues passing, as it tends to do. Connie graduates by the skin of her teeth. Their father, begrudgingly, buys her a car to celebrate her graduation.

And then, in the heat of summer, there comes a night.

Zoe cannot sleep. She doesn’t know why, but it’s 3am and she’s still rolling over in her bed, attempting to find a comfortable middle ground between the comfort of the space below her blankets and the freedom of the night air on her skin. Maybe it’s the fact she’s always preferred layering up in winter to attempting to pull her skin off in summer; maybe it’s the rolling undercurrent in her mind of thoughts that something might be going on, nebulous but persistent. Whatever it is, eventually it gets her up out of bed and leaning her head out of the window, trying to get a cool breath in.

She has, apparently, accidentally timed her restlessness perfectly with Connie’s. Her sister has climbed out of her window, scaled halfway across the tree in the front yard, and gone to knock on Zoe’s window. Zoe’s open window. With her head coming out of it.

Yeah, Zoe gets punched in the face.

“Oh, fuck, I’m so sorry -”

“Shit,” Zoe hisses, “what the fuck are you *doing?*”

“I was - I’m just - on my way out. Obviously. So I was gonna say goodbye.”

“Goodbye? How long are you leaving for?”

Connie looks sheepish. “... Forever?”

“What? You’re just gonna bounce?”

“I don’t know, man! It’s not like there’s anything left for me here, is there? I’m gonna move somewhere new. Make a new start.” She gestures to the floor, where she has apparently already thrown her suitcase. “Somewhere nobody knows who I am.”

“That shouldn’t be hard,” she mutters. “I’m assuming you do *not* want me to tell Mom and Dad I saw you?”

“You saw nothing. I just disappeared overnight. I did actually leave a note this time, though. Telling the truth.”

“You did what?”

“I mean, hey, why not piss ‘em off as much as I can before I’m gone forever? Parting shot, y’know?” Connie grins.

“They’re gonna lose their shit. Dad’s gonna be scared you *corrupted me* or something. I can feel it.”

“Yeah, sorry. And I’m changing my number, so... Text you.”

“Okay,” she takes a deep breath, “okay. Uh... bye?”



“Bye, Zoe. Talk to you soon.”

And then, just like that, her sister's gone. The quiet purr of its engine heralds the car's farewell as it rolls down the street and out of her life.

Zoe goes back to bed. She can't really do anything else.

Of course, in the morning, her parents figure it out - they're confused, angry, upset, but she can't offer them any answers, and in the end they just throw the note in the trash and decide to move on with their lives. Zoe's only too happy to agree with them on one front, at least: she no longer has a brother. Connor is dead.

(But Connie is alive, and she's doing better than ever - and boy does that feel sweet to know.)

## End Notes

please leave a comment if you got this far! happy pride month :D

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