

1 - *Flu* - Present

I'm just... so.. damn tired.

The sickening light of my computer monitor began to blur and the dirty clothes strewn across the floor started to shake. I made a fist and attempted to rid my eyes of the constant itchiness and burning sensation, but it just became more aggravated. My nose started to drip and my head started to throb. My throat clogs up and swells. All of the fluids were getting into my hair and making a mess. I swallowed but pain came instead of relief.

I was crying.

A flood of salty tears. I forgot the flu-like manifestations that came with these emotions. I hated it.

Why did these things have to happen to me?

Why? Why? Why? Why? Why?

I slowly arise from my bed and stumble across the floor, tripping over empty beer cans and papers that I never bothered to read. I hate all of this.

What have I done to deserve all of this bullshit?

My tears couldn't stop. My overtipped bottle of emotions was bottomless. Underneath the sadness and pity for myself was a tavern of anger. My fury bubbled up and erupted. My muscles tense and the pressure I felt from my fingers to my toes was making me tremble.

I try to say something, but just a hoarse scratch squirms out. I don't know why I even tried to speak; there's no one in this tiny apartment besides me and my thoughts.

There are basic drugs like Advil or Tylenol that can cure simple pain. Cold medicine would also do the job. But this is a different problem. Not something those pills can cure.

Well... I guess some kind of pill can cure it. However, overdose is far too likely.

2 - Stairs

The repetitive noise of my alarm was distant. It was just a muffled sound in the background, completely overwhelmed by the increasing crashes of my younger sibling coming down the stairs.

Identifying a family member by their footsteps is a simple task. My father sounded intimidating; the business-like formality of his heavy and confident steps motivated me to sit up with better posture and work on my homework. My mom often stops halfway through, typically to check her phone or something. God knows what she does there that makes her unable to walk down a couple goddamn flights of stairs. My younger sister typically treads in a carefree manner, the lightweight creaks are often muffled by the carpet. My younger brother, the middle child of our family, has the gait of just a normal person. I don't pay much attention to him, but it's clear when he's the one approaching.

I check the time. It's 6:45. That's way too early to get up for a bus that leaves at 7:30.

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It's 7:19. Dammit. My parents are yelling at me to come down. I rush out of bed and put on my clothes. I'm pretty sure they're clean. I brush my teeth and pack my bag with my computer. All of my papers and notebooks are in there because I never took them out last night to begin with. I rush down the stairs but stop halfway to get my socks, which were lying forgotten on top of my dresser. The shouts of my mom are basically background noise at this point. After grabbing the toast that she made for me, I put on my shoes and run out the door. The time is 7:27.

I'm running at a relatively slow pace. It's annoying how slow I am. It's not fair how so many other people are so fast, but I'm just awkwardly jogging along.

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I'm a block away from the bus, and it's already moving. It's only 7:32. Why can't they just wait a damn minute for me? I sprint to the bus and the bus driver opens the door for me. I go in and sit down in an open spot.

Why's everyone looking at me?

It honestly pisses me off how people at my school act. They're all fake and irritating. My friend, x, doesn't have a spot next to them open for me. This is my problem. Everyone around me hates me. Maybe they don't realize what I have to deal with, my internal struggles. Maybe everyone just doesn't care. Who can I trust other than myself? Maybe I should just kill myself.

I'm kidding. Of course.

God. Can you hear me? Why am I so late all the time? Why does everyone hate me? I know you're there, listening to me. Please, God.

3 - *Fruit* - Present

god
Why me?
These damn kids.

The damaged and decrepit lights that hung above me swung with the feeble gust of wind from the open window. The low growl of the air-conditioner spat and creaked every couple minutes. What used to be a comforting morning routine now feels no different from an unchanging regimen. The narcotics that inebriated me the night before only serve as a distraction from my girlfriend's onerous antics. Constant disillusion fills my brain. If happiness can only be achieved through direct injection into my veins, an overdose is far overdue.

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The kids file into my room for their first-period class. Their faces blend together. Their whispers of horny dreams and actions are overwhelming. What are they excited for? What are they awaiting? I wish I could just inform them of the truth. I pity the ones who continue to believe in the existence of a climax. There is no peak. Not in sex. Not in life.

I don't look at them as they march in. Their disgusting faces anger me to no end. I just pay attention to my own work. As I attempt to assemble an email, the uniform noises of their steps fill my eardrums and overflow my brain. I can't tell them apart. All of them are the same. However, one boy stands out. Without much effort at all, I can hear him make his way to the back of the classroom, carried by unorganized steps that squeak at every turn. The shiny floors that had recently been cleaned by the janitor fall victim to this child. It's almost as though he's trying to make more noise; trying to call attention towards himself. As a few faces turn his way, his complete indifference and annoyance is clear. I hate him. I detest people like that.

As I begin my lesson, that same boy pays no mind to any of my actions. He scratches vulgar drawings into his paper and notebook. It's a drawing of a penis. Great. I'm glad this is the fruit of my labor; the blood and sweat that goes into this job. The emergence of a talented artist.

I shift in my seat. My chair creaks from the entire weight of my body supporting itself on it. My back aches. My body aches. My life aches.

Maybe there is no god.

4 - Project

As I wait in line for lunch, I go up to a group of my friends. A couple of them acknowledge me with a nod, but my close friend, z, says hi.

“Hey, y, what class did you just get out of?”

“English. I didn’t do my homework. Mr.* was pissed as hell. I don’t know who stuck a stick up his ass this morning.”

“Ah geez. I had him for first period. But then Ms. # second. She’s chill so it was fine.”

“Oh damn you have #??” chimed in n, one of z’s other friends.

Why is he talking in our conversation? No one invited him. He’s so fucking annoying.

“Yeah, I have her later today also.” I smirked. I knew what he was about to say.

“Good Lord, she’s so hot. When she bends over in class... I just.. Hnng,”

More and more people started to add to the conversation. It was weird. I could obviously tell that z was uncomfortable. Not that it’s any of my business, but I feel bad when anyone asks him stupid and horny questions about women. He’s not really into that stuff, you know? They’re also our teachers for God’s sake. I’m not a stickler for directly following all of the rules or whatever, but this kind of shit still doesn’t completely sit right with me. I make a futile attempt to shift the conversation.

“How did that project go for you all? I spent hours on it and only got to finish it this morning.” That was a lie. I didn’t do any of the work. But the common topic of school was my saving grace for any kind of socializing during the school year.

One person responded by saying it was pretty easy, but no one else said anything.

Fuck. Now what can I say?

Even though this tiny exchange between me and that other person was next to completely insignificant, I still felt shitty. I felt unheard and useless. My eyes darted back and forth between the shoes of the members of our friend group.

Even though I had no way of knowing, I could tell that everyone was staring at me. Mocking me. I shifted my weight awkwardly, the pain of my horrible posture and hunched back had been growing unbearable. The scrutiny I felt was overbearing.

I know it was a pathetic question to ask.

I know I was lying.

I know I’m a piece of shit.

I know none of you actually care about me.

I know. I know. I know.

5 - Alone - Present

Why is everyone so fake?

A peculiar but familiar sour stench wafted across the bustling cafeteria. I wrinkle my nose in response. I know they can't help it, but the way that the students' B.O. just fully saturates the air makes me want to rip my nose off. I can tell the other teachers can sense it as well. I sit down next to a group of them.

There's Mr. E, the math teacher. He's in his early-50s I think. His face always has a slightly pink tinge and the vertical lines between his eyebrows that look like some barcode are increasingly prominent. There's a thick metal band that often rests on his ring finger. But sometimes, when his veins protrude more than normal, the ring is nowhere to be seen. He gets along well with some of the female teachers, but I'm not sure they enjoy his company as much as he thinks they do. You can always tell when he's approaching. His footsteps are intimidating and command attention. He's a harsh person, but he mostly gives good advice. He reminds me of my own father.

Then there's Ms. P, the Latin teacher. She's kind of new to the school. I don't know much about her, but she has a distinct voice and disposition that makes me feel comfortable around her. She's nice to me and always greets me. I don't know what I did to deserve her kindness. Maybe I should hold off on talking with her. My girlfriend wouldn't like it.

And lastly, there's T, the gym teacher. He's a fine person or whatever, but the fact that we receive the same pay just makes me unable to interact with him properly. I don't care about whether or not he deserves the pay. I simply don't care. But sometimes I laugh too hard or become too intrigued by our conversations. Sometimes seeing him already sitting at the table makes me feel more excited. No. Not more excited. I maybe just feel slightly less dread for the future half of an hour that we all spend in the lunchroom.

I'm fully aware that none of us are actually friends. We just sit together for company while we eat. Sometimes we talk. We joke. We tell stories and ask for advice. But whenever I begin to get too close or begin to enjoy their presence too much, I pull back. I'm aware it's simply just my own delusions. We're colleagues.

I look up. The bright blue lights of the cafeteria mock me. I look across the room at the tables of teenagers. They're all talking about whatever. They only became friends because they were stuck in the same class. Is there even such a thing as true friendship? Or is it all just forced companionship to block out the unending flow of our own thoughts. Forced companionship so we don't become bored.

I see Ms. P glance to her left at the clock on the wall. Mr. E sighs and fiddles with his ring. T scrolls through his phone. I know they don't want to be here. I know they don't care about me. Of course I don't care for them either.

Friendship is just a distraction.

*I'm sorry you're forced to sit with someone like me.
I'm just... I'm sorry.*

6 - Horace

Why doesn't anyone care?

There was some dirt that was packed into all of the creases and crevices of Z's old shoes. The constant tapping of his left knee didn't make a noise, but sometimes I could feel the floor trembling under him. His small leg hairs stick out in random ways. He has a pencil bag with a bunch of flowers on it. I gave it to him as a present in 7th grade. I kinda got it as a joke, but he still uses it to this day. I feel bad about it, but also a little good. Maybe a bit boastful. I don't know.

He normally wears pants and an old jacket over a shirt. The jacket has some name written near the left chest area. It reads *Horace*. It's a navy-blue bomber jacket. We make fun of it whenever we see him. Making stupid jokes like: *Oh, hi Horace!* Or maybe *Nice jacket, Horace*. Or even, if we're feeling like four years old, we'd say: *You're the ace of all whores, Horace*. You know, the dumbest shit imaginable. I say we do these things, but it's actually just me.

Sometimes, when the heat humidity becomes unbearable, he wears this pair of black shorts and takes off the jacket. If you look hard enough, there are a couple faint lines across his thighs and arms. Uneven sizes and differing colors. They barely stick out on his dark-ish skin. Some small part of me feels proud almost about how he told me about them. If anyone asks, he says they're scars from shaving his legs. He's a dude and has never shaved his legs though. I have a couple lines like those. They're on my feet, so I don't know if they really count. They're also extremely light, like tiny scratches. They don't pierce the skin. I remember when I did it, I purposely found a place without any intersections. I used a pair of scissors. Like the safety scissors you use in kindergarten.

My parents still don't let me use scissors without asking me why I need them and what I'm going to do with them first.

His lines look like the tics you use when counting the score or something, or maybe what prisoners do in movies to count the amount of days passed by. Mine are like some child's drawings on a wall. Some pathetic attempt to get my parents or other people to look my way.

I mentioned it to him once. He's normally the kind of guy who never has a straight face. I'd never seen him cry before then. His eyes widened with shock. They stuck out like some kind of moons against his dark skin.

Is that racist to say? Forget my last sentence then...

He was surprised. I thought he was gonna laugh. I mean, anyone would. But he showed me his lines on his leg. I don't really remember anything else. Maybe we talked. Maybe we didn't. I don't know. It kind of felt like we were exchanging baseball cards or whatever. Maybe.

7 - Magma - Present

No plot twists surprise me anymore.

The pot of boiling water's grumbles are the only thing I can hear. It's almost like a volcano. The magma swirls around in a small steel container. The olive oil treads on its surface. Just below this is a chamber that contains air that can create second-degree burns in a matter of a single second.

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The wrinkles on my shirt are barely visible. The creases disappear when I stretch the fabric. My back is as straight as a board. I feel good. My girlfriend of two years is over for dinner. It's our anniversary today. It's been long enough. I'm thinking of bringing up the topic of marriage for the first time. I don't want to make her uncomfortable.

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We met a little more than two years ago. She and one of my acquaintances were both celebrating their Grad School graduation. They were friends with each other, so we met and talked a bit. She's an ambitious woman with a life laid out for her. I don't deserve her.

Maybe our relationship was out of convenience. To this day, I still doubt whether or not she actually loves me. This is a problem I should talk over with her. I hope to bring it up tonight.

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She twirls the pasta on her plate with a fork. She puts a vegetable in her mouth and uncomfortably chews it. For some reason, I ignore her obviously unusual mannerisms.

I reach out to touch her hand. I want to say some kind of genuine, sappy shit. Even though it might sound stupid, I want to tell her. I want to discuss the future. I don't necessarily feel completely at ease with her, per se. Maybe it's some kind of showing my best self? I don't know.

But I do love her. I know I do. She loves me. She said so. I know she does.

But when I grab her hand, she kind of flinches. I'm a bit surprised, but I don't want to make her feel uncomfortable so I draw back. She kind of crosses her arms and says:

"I'm on my period right now, and I'm not really in the mood."

No. That's not. I'm not. No. I didn't mean it like that.

"Oh, okay. That's fine then." I say

No. No. I didn't mean that. That wasn't my intention.

She sighs. She buttons up her cardigan over her chest. There's silence. It's too long. It's too awkward. It's too familiar.

"What's wrong?"

"We need to talk." She says.

I know what's coming. I've been anticipating this for the past two years.

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The wrinkles on my shirt are clearly visible. The creases are still present even when I stretch the fabric. My collar isn't standing upright. My posture is as bad as it always is. The only thing supporting me is the chair underneath my body. There's a pit below me. I'm sinking. The viscous magma is slowly swallowing me, feet first. But it's under the surface. No one can see.