

Denialism

The blaring music was overwhelming for my hazy mind to endure. The bass was thumping throughout the confined house, with bodies of various strangers that I've never seen squeezed into every nook and cranny of Ayden's house party.

I felt someone tugging on my forearm, and (unfortunately), I recognized the fluffy heap of blonde hair in front of me. *Of course my stupid sibling had to find me here.* Newt's always fetching me at mom's request. I should've answered my phone and pretended to be sober.

"What are you doing here? You know that you're not allowed out at this time of night! It's dangerous! And, it's *way* past your 11:30 curfew."

My brother glared at me, as his strong grip pulled me out of the house and into the cold twilight. I shivered as the cold nipped at my face, and the bare skin that my underdressed outfit failed to conceal. *I wish dad could've found me instead and taken me home in his truck.*

"You always ruin everything! I just wanted to have one night out, and you have to just screw it up! It's not dangerous, it's a party, Newt. Grow up and stop tattling to mommy. I'm 19, for god's sake! I am a freshman in college!"

"Just because you're an adult doesn't mean anything. You don't know who or what could be out there. What were you thinking, Liv? Of course mom assigned you a curfew, you still live with us."

I groan, trying to break free from his grip. *Maybe I shouldn't have gone to community college.* I hate that he always has to come bring me back to mom and her wrath that awaits me at home. Digging my feet into, I tried to delay the punishment that was awaiting me. Dad will tell mom to go easy on me. *He'll be there to hug me when I get home.*

“I don’t have a curfew, s-stop trying to act like dad! You can n-never be him.”

Newt sighed and looked down at the rocky gravel, and kicked some rocks with his beat up converse. What’s his problem?

“Liv...Dad isn’t here anymore. You do realize that, right?”

I glared at him as tears threatened to fall from my eyelids. I hung my head and clenched my fists. He’s lying. That just can’t be right. Newt is and will always be a big fat liar.

“S-shut up! Just take me h-home, Newt. I want dad.”

His face contorted into one of understanding and pity as he wrapped a firm arm around my trembling shoulders as I stumbled into him on the way over to his car.

“He’s still here, N-Newt, I can feel him. He’s h-hugging me right now.”

I pathetically wrap my arms around myself as tears roll down my cheeks, thinking of my dad and how I might come home to him. Newt turns to look at me in confusion at my sudden halt. He realized that any attempt to convince me would be in vain.

“Liv, you’re just drunk. Let’s just get you home, okay? We can talk about this when you’re clear-headed.”

“Dads will be t-there, right? He h-has to be!”

Newt turned away and went quiet. I felt the clamminess seep into my palms as I used my arms to caress myself. He’s still here. He has to be. I see him in Newt’s blonde hair. I can already envision his shadow standing in the open doorway when we get home. *He is the one reason I decided to stay back here in our shitty hometown.*

“Dad’s c-coming home soon...right?”

No answer. My mind felt blurry as I stumbled towards Newt’s car...His arm tightened around my shoulders. Dad had a firm grip just like that. What? He still has that. He’s still here.

“Liv...dad’s gone. Like forever gone. He isn’t coming back, sis. You just need to accept it.”

“D-DON’T LIE TO M-ME!”

I wailed as my head lolled onto Newt’s shoulder. My body felt uncomfortably warm as Newt swept me off the ground in one movement. I sniffled and tried to muffle my sobs into his wool sweater as he continued to carry me to his car.

“I...just want dad. Please bring h-him back to m-me, Newt.”

“I can’t. I’m so sorry.”

My cries quieted down as Newt unlocked his car with his key, and opened the passenger door. I was too dazed to speak or move. My heavy breathing was the only thing that filled the uncomfortable silence of my persistent denial.

It’s been weeks since I last saw dad, I knew that much. But every inch of my body and brain still rejects the fact that dad is gone. I just need him to come back. To come back to me. To come back to the family that he left behind so selfishly. *How could he ever do that to us? To me?*

Newt sighed softly as he scooped my now still body back up, and sat me down on his sticky leather seat. I felt the seatbelt extend over my torso, and followed by its click. Everything just feels blurry and surreal.

I know that I don’t really hate my brother. He is like dad in many ways. Maybe dad is in him now. That might be where he went. I groaned lamely and hung my head low.

“Are you sure he’s not coming back? I w-want him to know that I-I really miss himmm...”

I slurred as my back slouched against the sticky black leather seat as Newt got in the driver's seat beside me and started the car with the turn of his key fob. I watched my brother as he turned on the heated seats. He sighs.

“Sis...wish I could let him know that too, but he’s not coming home anytime soon. He’s gone, liv. Like...gone for dead gone.”

That statement hung in the air like smoke in a hotboxed car. Newt put the car in drive, backing out of his parking spot on the right side of the street taking me away from all the partygoers still in the jumpacked house. The silence was painful, and my eyelids grew heavy. I put my weight onto the side of the car door, resting my head upon the glass window as I observed the horribly lit road that’s lined with the edge of the forest dad used to take me hunting in.

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I remember how I cried when I shot my first deer. The sound of the bullet making contact with the doe’s delicate body was enough to send 9 year old me into hysterics. Dad just hugged me tight and told me that he also cried when he shot his first deer. I asked him if I could’ve shot a turkey instead, but he told me that deers were hunted to shorten their population size.

That night, I was too scared to sleep as the deer’s limp body haunted my dreams. I slid into my parents bed and cuddled up to dad, telling him about my nightmare. He told me, “It’s alright baby, I understand,” and sang me “‘Don’t Stop Believin’” by Journey, until I fell asleep that night. Safe and sound in his big strong arms.

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I felt my lashes flutter slightly as I wrapped my arms around my bare shoulders in a stupid attempt to remind myself of that moment from my childhood. I realized the car was

motionless at that moment as I felt the red light from the intersection shine onto the hood of the car. Newt was playing around with the radio station in his car until he found the right song. I hated that he did that at every red light. He's too picky with his taste in music. Dad did this too, and I always yelled at him to keep his eyes on the road.

I feel too weighted down with substance and tiredness to yell at Newt right now. I just blinked slowly as I watched his fingers turn the volume up, and switch to different stations until he could find *just* the perfect song. The light switched to green, and he paused his fiddling, continuing down the route I recognized as the fastest way home from Ayden's. I know this route so well that I could identify it even in my worst states of mind.

The sound of music began to play out of the speakers, and I instantly recognized the melody even in my blacked out state. It was one of Journey's greatest hits. And it was dad's favorite song. It was "*Don't stop Believin'.*"

"Ugh, this song sucks. Hey sis, are you still here with me or are you on cloud nine again?"

I just groaned quietly, as my body refused to move, my eyes were fighting the familiar battle of sleep. It was slowly winning, dragging me over the line into its blissful realm of forgetting. Newt knew I wasn't with him right now. *I wish I was with dad*, but I'm closer to closing my eyes than I am to both my brother or dad right now.

"Sorry, this is the wrong station. Do you think you could change it? I hate this song."

I felt tears begin to take over my eyes as the song continued to play. My hands begin to tremble slightly as they sit in my lap, and I shake my head. *Don't change it. It's dad's song. His favorite song.*

I wish I could tell him that. But he knows how I act when I'm in this state. Newt probably already knows that I wish I could tell him something right now.

"You actually like this song sis? I didn't know you were into *Journey*."

I shake my head. No! I actually hate Journey. I only like this song because dad loves it. I hated rock. I only listen to it because dad loves it, and he always puts it on in his car.

"Dad...it's dad's fav-orite...p-please..."

Newt's smile wiped off his face and he turned down the volume as he glanced between me and the dark road ahead of us. He's probably used to my drunk hysterics and my reluctance to let go of dad. I don't know why either. I just miss him. He's still here with us in my mind.

All I know is that I just want my dad. I wish he'd greet me with his warm smile when we get home. I wish he'd take me hunting again. I wish he'd be the one to ground me for staying out past curfew instead of mom. *I still love you dad. Please, I love you. Come to me.*

Before I knew it, Newt pulled into our driveway and killed the car engine. I squinted as the overhead lights turned on. He reached over to unbuckle my seatbelt. I could barely see him now as my eyelids batted repetitively.

"Just sleep, sis. Just go to sleep, you're tired, okay?"

I heard a small quiver in his voice, as his hand reached up to stroke my sticky brown hair that's coated with spilled soda. I looked over at him as I resisted sleep so that I could stare at my dear brother a little longer. He looks so much like dad now. *Dad? Is that you?*

"Just sleep. I love you, I'll let mom know we're home."

"Love you..dad."

"I'm not dad, Liv, he's gone. He's not here with us anymore."

My world began to fade into endless darkness as I fell unconscious in the sticky passenger seat of my brother's car. I could feel myself being picked up by my brother as I drifted farther and farther away from consciousness and closer to the deep depths of slumber.

I hope that I'll wake up and dad will be with me again.