

FRAGILITY AND HOPE IN A WORLD OF UNCERTAINTY



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Switch

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You slump onto your bed. The springs squeak as you sink. Your parents are arguing. You're used to it. Ever since 'the incident', it's constant. They don't blame it on you. They assure you it's not your fault, but there's always that underlying feeling that it is. Before it happened, before the grey clouds washed over, an argument was rare. But now the arguments don't even leave, they hang around and engulf your body like you're drowning in an ocean. In some ways, they're worse than the clouds. You get it. They're arguing about what's best for you. They stress, fret, dance around you and God you wish they didn't. You wish it would just go back to how it was, before they knew and you were handling it by yourself and it wasn't a big deal.

The day it changed was like a switch that turned the light off within your whole world. Two weeks after your brother went missing. It was 4 am. The soft knock at the door seemed to boom through the hollow house. You knew you wouldn't have to get it. No one was sleeping. Dad bolted out of bed quicker than lightning. You snuck around the corner and when there was no sight of him you went back to bed. Sitting on your bed, looking out the window, the tears wouldn't even fall. You could make out the shades of blue and red outside, all blurred. After murmurs and a 'thank you', the soft click of the door locking followed by a sound of what could only be dad sliding down the door, back turned, head in hands. The house was silent enough to hear the teardrops hitting mum's pillow and the

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thoughts rattling in dad's head. It's a small town, the information spread like wildfire, and come breakfast the words not said and sorrow not faced appears in the form of neighbours' casseroles and apple pies. You understand it's a sign of empathy, but everyone knows the full dinner table doesn't make up for the empty chair.

Time passes, and sooner or later some structure has seemingly returned, yet you still aren't right. Mum says she's fine, but you catch her in his room when she thinks she's alone. You don't go in there, for you know if you do, you'll lose it. You grow distant from everyone. Getting further behind on your schoolwork but your teachers take it easy. Everyone looks at you with pity. Everyone knows and you wish they didn't. You're trying to get better but it just gets worse. Mum and Dad tell you to talk about it, let out your emotions, cry, yell, do something. But you can't bring yourself to do anything. You're blank. You start going to counselling but find it doesn't work, you write but just get frustrated that you can't find the right words, you take medication but it takes no effect. It gets to the point where you just want to go. Leave. Escape. Not just this town, but this world.

Memories of waking up to the sound of beeping machines and the harsh smell of disinfectant and steel arise. When your eyes flutter open, your parents rush over; cheeks damp and eyes red, now full of relief. You were stuck in that room for a while; you knew all the nurses by first name and most of their stories, what food was on what day and you even knew which lights meant what. The day you got discharged you still didn't feel any different, just tired. A little bit numb. The road trip home was glum. It was raining. You remember looking out the window, counting the rain drops as silence buzzed around the car. You can just tell that questions are on the tips of your parents' tongue but you're glad they're not asking. They understand. You get

home, have dinner, watch TV and go to bed. Stirring around midnight, your ears hearing melancholy trembles of your parents' voices, trying not to break. There's no energy within to stay up and listen. You fall asleep thinking of how different it is, so out of character, how offbeat your world has become.

It becomes routine, mum and dad arguing. Although they still can't bring themselves to do it in your presence. They don't want you to know that what's left of them is crumbling, out of fear you will too ... yet again. The worst bit is you know they still love each other. You catch it in tiny glimpses. Mum's blue eyes, as deep as the ocean, catching dad when he's most vulnerable. Dad's quivering voice yelling at Mum, still with the obvious tone of devotion sprinkled with hints of guilt. It makes you ache: the realisation their love for you is so strong. That they'd rather lose the love they've created than you, the symbol of it.

Insomnia consumes. The beam of moonlight dances through your curtain and illuminates your typically dull room. The house rings of defeat; silence engulfs it. You're glad but at the same time frightened. Frightened, in recognition that they've reached the point where they don't even have vigour to challenge. You suddenly have shivers all over your body and you find yourself making your way down the ghostly hall, into your parents' room. They are as far away from each other as possible, like the moon to the sun. The space between them is enough for you. You climb in and at first they both jolt in alarm, but once they feel the familiarity of you, they calm. It doesn't take long until their bodies have melted around yours. Everyone's awake but nothing is said. Nothing has to be said. You slowly notice it. The room has softened around you, as your parents have. You wonder what someone would see if they were to walk in: a pattern of tired, intertwined, connected bodies. You hope they'd see a mosaic: a dance of shattered, yet gleaming, fragments.