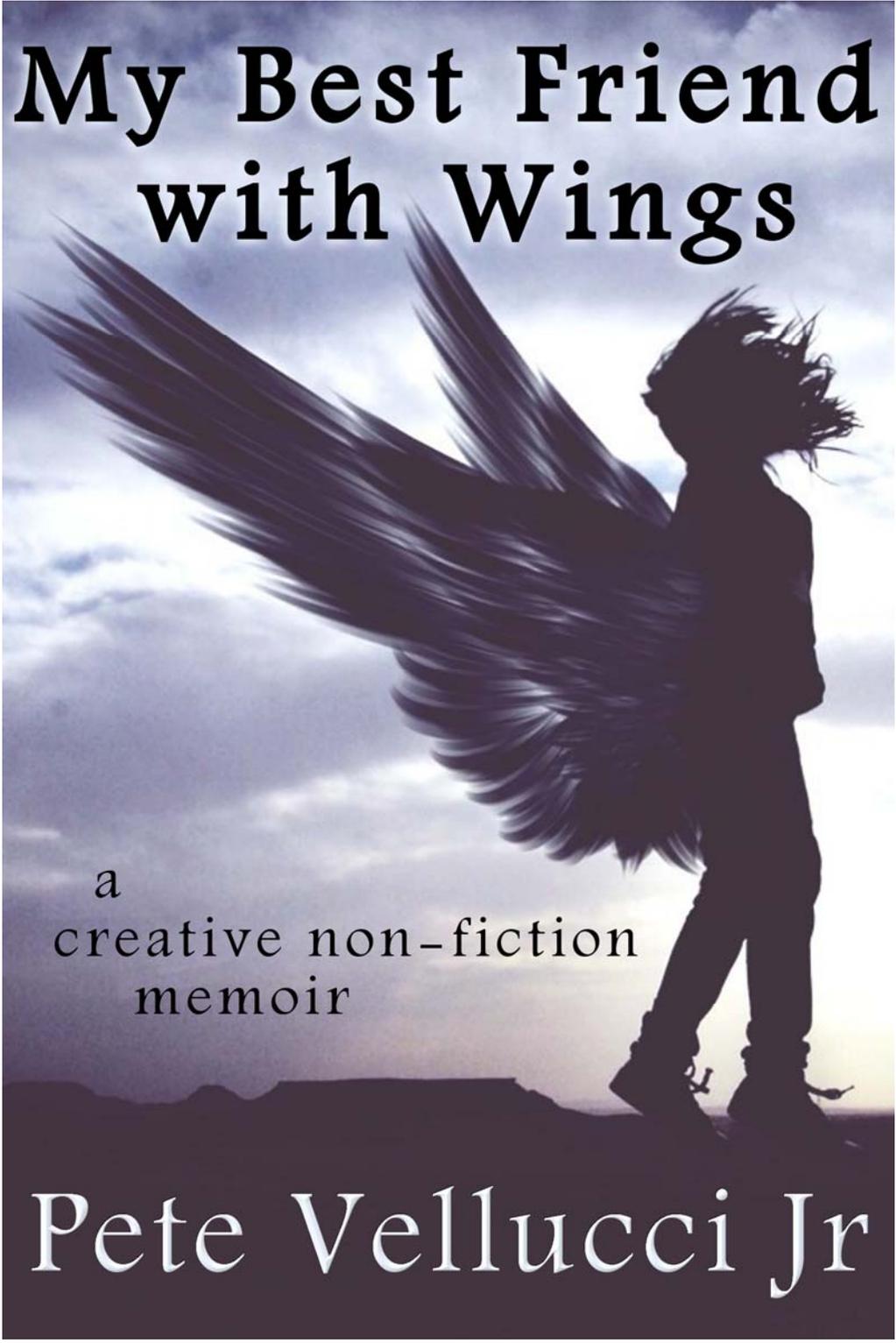


# My Best Friend with Wings



a  
creative non-fiction  
memoir

Pete Vellucci Jr

# **My Best Friend with Wings**

**by Pete Vellucci Jr**

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This memoir is a work of creative non-fiction,  
it contains elements of both fantasy and fact;  
but in the sea of meaning,  
this story is anchored by absolute truth.

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About the Author

I just found out that my best friend passed away.  
His name was Dave, and this story is for him.

## **I. Travels**

According to the text message, he died last night. Here I am trapped at work, and I can't grieve. The expectation is to remain composed, to dam up feeling, to turn on autopilot and absentmindedly perform tasks, to just get through the rest of this day. Try my hardest to not crumple to the floor right now, to not fucking cry. Wait until it's appropriate.

It's later that night, at home, when I finally release my emotional dissonance.

It's been less than a year since I moved from the small hometown Dave and I shared, but the unfortunate truth is our lives had begun moving in separate directions long before then—our individual paths leading us down increasingly distant roads. Shortly before I moved, he paid me a visit. We talked and laughed as though nothing had ever changed—our conversation the brief phantom of times long gone. We kept in touch infrequently after I left town. He had shared with me his own plan to move, but a mere week away from taking a step that would have changed his life forever, he slipped into tragic permanence instead.

Seeking information, I call a mutual friend to exchange condolences. As fond memories of Dave are shared, my heart aches with loss. As knowledge regarding Dave's passing is disclosed, my heart sinks with sadness. And as plans for the wake are described, the guilt drops my heart straight into my stomach. I'm attempting to pathetically explain how personal constraints will prevent a trip home for the service, when my friend tells me about a memorial concert planned for a later date—one I *can* make. I take comfort in knowing I'll be attending something that truly honors Dave's memory. Given how we grew up, the environments in which we placed ourselves, and the events to which we gave priority, I have no doubt he'd *prefer* my presence at the concert.

A couple of weeks pass, and now I'm reflecting back on that thought as I sling my backpack, containing the few personal belongings I need for this trip, over my shoulder. My girlfriend gives me a parting kiss as I head out from the apartment we share. Glancing back, I see her standing in our doorway waving goodbye. Perhaps she should be coming with me, but if there's one thing I feel sure of it's that this is a journey I must travel alone.

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The streets of my Boston neighborhood are always quiet this early, yet as I walk to the nearest subway station, I can't help but perceive the lifelessness to be ominous. The world feels strange today—or maybe I feel strange, as if I have to forcibly focus on what's in front of me or I'll lose myself. There's no in between. No gray area even though the world feels gray. Keep my focus.

My steady breaths billow as fog in the cold like a smoker's exhale, and I reminisce on chilly, Pennsylvania mornings when Dave and I, warmed by the cherry

glow of our cigarettes, stood fascinated by the dance of our smoke in the frigid, still air. I gave up the habit for good a few years ago, but this morning I'd gladly accept cancer if it meant getting one more smoke in with my friend.

Having arrived at the station, I board a waiting train and sink into a vacant seat. A chime sounds the doors closing, and the train carries me deeper into the city. I'm heading for a commuter terminal where I'll be taking a charter bus from my new home—with a transfer in New York City—to the town I used to call such. Like anyone who's ever been mired in small town drama and misery, I loathed growing up there; but since freeing myself, I've been able to enjoy my infrequent visits back. This time, however, I am returning for a reason, a matter of purpose hanging in the distance.

"It's about to get cramped," complains an indiscernible voice. Early morning travelers have been steadily filling the train at each stop, and now someone sits next to me, brushing uncomfortably close. Young professionals and university students jam-pack the car, and I'm pinned in my seat by the crowd. To take my mind off the congestion, I think of Dave and how he had such power of presence, possibly greater than anyone I've ever known. No one had a personal bubble in which he believed he was not welcomed to enter, and physical space seemed nonessential when he did.

The train reaches the commuter station, and I step off, slipping along with a stream of people flowing in the same direction. I succeed in reaching my bus queue early as planned, which will grant me choice of my ideal seat—front, with a view of the road. I suffer from motion sickness, which triggers when I do not have direct sight of any motion my body may be sensing—it's a real nuisance on the subways. Also, since I'm making this trip alone, I need to be wary of the possibility of a friendly stranger; so, once seated, I place my bag in the seat beside me, insert my ear-buds, and close my eyes. These rude tactics are a means of putting off all but the most assertive of passengers, and my efforts pay off as I'm still seated by myself when we disembark the station. I lower the volume of my music and settle in for the trip, hoping I'll be fortunate enough to slip into a nap.

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Sounds seep into my ears: people are laughing.

I gasp for breath: I am laughing with them.

I find myself comfortably crammed in a church van, which is shuttling our youth group on some religious excursion. I hear my best friend's voice—telling jokes—coming from behind me, and as I turn to look back, I catch a glimpse of our pastor in the rearview mirror: his face is blank and marred like a scratched out photograph. My view continues to pan, and I discover my peers similarly featureless; but then Dave—sharp and clear—enters my field of vision. The sound of surrounding laughter abruptly cuts off. At first he wears an expression of deep sincerity on his long, droopish face while his hound-dog eyes gaze at me with an unnerving somberness; but then his mouth breaks into a friendly smile as he smacks his forehead, hard, with one hand and follows by coolly running his fingers through his parted brown hair.

I return his smile with uneasy confusion.

"Life's tough; get a helmet," he says.

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I'm startled awake when my head smacks into something; the bus must have braked hard and sent my body lurching forward.

The New York City skyline towers before us, and I give up trying to recall my dream as our bus creeps into the city with the rest of the traffic. Through the bus' heavily tinted windows I observe Big Apple natives. In a single city block I can witness happiness and fear, fellowship and loneliness, intimidation and apprehension. Every expression—no matter which—underscored with a hard edge and urgency.

When the bus makes a turn, a ray of sunlight gleams across the windows; and I picture Dave's bright smile, as if reflected from a dream. I recall how he always managed to honestly express any feeling with an underlined friendliness—at least when he was around me... maybe he was different when I wasn't there.

The bus has reached its drop-off point in the heart of Manhattan, a few blocks from Madison Square Garden; and after exiting, I secure my backpack and adjust my pace to an appropriate speed for walking through New York. My connecting bus leaves from the Port Authority station, only ten blocks away, but there's a noticeably major difference in traversing this city as compared with Boston: it's as though New Yorkers view every other person as an obstacle in their path; the crowds don't flow, they battle. I can't relax here, and I find myself imaging Dave—who preferred even his own aggressive, bohemian lifestyle measured out over prolonged stretches of time—would feel the same: New York is fun but it suffocates.

I'm strangled in a mass of bodies crisscrossing an intersection. Car horns blare from every which way—the drivers ignoring this city's ineffectual No Honking ordinance. I'm jostled and pushed as I press my way to the opposite sidewalk, and I'm dismayed to find my path blocked at the corner by two large women with not enough room to pass between. These women are chatting loudly in some foreign language and holding their ground like monolithic structures. With the light changing, the crowd surges, shoving me forward. Unable to veer away, I lean into the women, find the crevice between their plump guts, and force a break. One of them shouts something at me, but this *is* New York: never look back—especially not for noises directed toward you. I keep moving, leaving the beached whales in my wake. I can hear Dave's voice in my head: he would have thanked them for the dance.

Still a couple of blocks from my transfer, I break into a power walk; Dave's voice gets oddly clearer: "*No rush. I'm not going anywhere.*"

I arrive with a few minutes to spare and hit the restroom. Standing in a stall, I glance over the faded scrawls of graffiti and random blurbs; and one phrase stands out: "Dave's not here, man." Cracking a smile, I resist the urge to pull out a pen and write, "Tell that to the voice in my head."

While washing my hands, I take a look at myself in the mirror; and I wonder whether that's a bit of delirium glinting in my eyes. The automatic faucet stops running over my still soapy hands. I shake my head clear and finish rinsing. Then a quick, futile use of the air dryer and I'm off to my bus.

I'm not as fortunate in my seat selection this time, and when we pull out of the station, most of the passengers, including the one in front of me, push their seats back and fall asleep. I fidget in what little room I have, trying to get comfortable—an unattainable goal, but I manage to get as close as possible. With my ear-buds reinserted, I lean my

head against the cool glass of the side window. Doing my best to ignore the sense of nausea, I close my eyes and focus in on the music. I'm listening to songs from Dave's most recent band, *Waking Amelia*... his last band. As I drift off, visions of what the memorial concert could be like construct themselves in my mind. Through his lyrics, Dave's voice fills my head; and I sleep.

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I spin my way through a revolving door, leaving the evening behind me as I enter the gold and crimson lobby of an antiquated theater—a relic to past entertainment. Across the antechamber, past the unattended ticket-taker's box, and beyond the disused concessions counter with its archaic corn popper, a pair of glossy, wooden doors stand closed. A rusted, steel chain is wrapped—many times—around the two vertically curved golden poles that serve as each door's handle. A couple of the chain's solid links are held captive by an oversized iron padlock. Behind the doors, I hear familiar sounds: instruments tune up with strummed out guitar riffs and a wild crashing of drums, feedback reverberates then calms, and an amplified voice rings out: "*Test. Test. Testing, test. Check one.*" It is Dave's voice.

Grabbing the chains, I pull, twist, flex, struggle, and—eventually defeated—release them. I kick hard at the padlock but only manage to cause it to leave an insignificant ding in the thick wood of the doors. I lean my ear against the door, hoping to catch his voice again; and this time I pick up the murmur of a waiting crowd. *How had they gotten in?* I take another look around the lobby behind me, and my eyes are drawn to the ticket-taker's box—a show *would* require a ticket.

I run over and pry at the lid of the box, but that, too, is securely fastened. I peer into the drop slot on top, but it's too dark to see anything inside... except for a peculiar, tiny speck of bright white, shining like a single distant star in the night's black sky. An uncontrollably intense curiosity overcomes me, and I leap to the concession stand and hurl the popcorn machine as if it were a cumbersome wrecking ball, crashing it into the hollow, wooden box.

Glass shatters into jagged shards, metal parts dent and leave sharp edges at odd angles, and the box spills its contents as it breaks loose from the floor and topples over; ticket stubs mix with the wreckage. I carefully sift through the pile with my foot and kick out something shiny. I gingerly pick it up, along with one of the torn tickets. The object is a white key, and printed on the ticket stub are the words, "Presenting: *Waking Amelia*."

The padlock accepts the key, and as I turn it, I listen for more sounds from behind the door; it seems strangely quiet. With the chain loose, I began to unwrap it from the door handles; music starts playing, but it's not coming from the theater within. The origin of the sound is indeterminable, but it grows louder as each length of chain is unraveled. I recognize the song, and I try my damndest to ignore it. The chain drops to the ground. The music fills my head. With the doors freed, I grab both handles and pull....

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I awake on the bus, my ringtone obnoxiously filling the otherwise quiet vehicle. Most of the passengers are still sleeping, but a few disapprovingly clear their throats at the disruptive sound. Having missed the call, I retrieve my now silent phone from my pocket. The display shows the call was from my mother. She will be the one picking me up from the arrival station, so I give her a call back. While the phone rings, I peer out my window to catch a glimpse of a highway exit sign to gauge the distance remaining. My mother answers and I quickly explain in a hushed voice when she ought to expect my arrival. Without prolonged conversation, she affirms she will be there for me; and we end the call. With the interruption over, I pocket my phone and try to piece together mental fragments from my recent dream—hoping to fall back into it.

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I'm standing in the pit area below a darkened stage. The theater behind me is filled with strangers; indistinguishable faces gaze toward the stage from rows of seats, and huddled groups of standing bodies pack the aisles. I wonder how many of these people are friends to Dave, but as I try to pick out anyone familiar, the crowd begins to applaud.

I turn back around toward the stage and get a face full of blue smoke. Stage lights are casting a hue over the fog as it rolls off the high-set wooden platform. A low growl emits from the speakers and resounds around the theater. As it grows in volume and power, a slow collective clap rises up from the crowd. The tone peaks. My anticipation reaches an insufferable measure. Then all the lights shut off, and the sound cuts out—without reverberation, without even lingering in the ear. The crowd hushes, and with the room pitch black and silent, I feel as though we've crossed an event horizon.

A burst of white light fills the scene, momentarily blinding us; but as clarity comes back, the band stands silhouetted on the stage: the bulky frame of Tyree sits behind a blocky drum kit; the tall tower of Micah, brandishing his guitar, stands beside the shorter, scrawnier Kevin, strapped with his bass; and somehow—miraculously—Dave, a pillar standing front and center. Faster than the dumbstruck crowd can react, Dave spins out his own guitar from around his back and the band breaks into song. Like master craftsmen, Waking Amelia—once again whole—weaves musical poetry for those in attendance.

The crowd erupts in a fury of cheers and rushes the stage, filling the pit. The response fuels the guys, and they begin to exchange rock star moves with one another and out toward their fans. Dave plays off the audience like a pro. When he returns to center stage, and to the microphone standing ominously untouched, a spotlight singles him out. He continues to strum away with seemingly effortless precision, his head tilts for his mouth to hit the angle on the mic, and then Dave lets his voice surround us.

The crowd reacts fervently: bodies press forward; arms and hands stretch out. All these strangers trying to reach the stage, trying to contact my friend, they're crushing me. Dave stops playing to pull the microphone free from its stand, and then he leaps from the stage and slides right through the throng. He's standing before me and he smiles, and then there is so much breathing room, as though everyone else has been pushed away.

The crowd continues to watch on from outside this bubble of seclusion. Dave tosses me the mic, and I hold it near his mouth as he picks the lyrics back up and returns

to strumming his guitar. Dave moves beside me and nudges me, urging me to sing along with him; and even though I'm unsure of the lyrics—and entirely sure of my lack of ability—I nervously join in. I try to throw an arm around Dave's shoulder, but the sudden sensation of an electric shock causes me to recoil. Dave steps away to reface me; he has ceased playing again, but the band rocks on in his absence.

He looks at me solemnly, but he's incapable of holding the expression; and it breaks into the biggest smile as he shouts, "Dude!"

I beam my own epic smile and return the simple exclamation. "Dude!"

"I love you, man!"

"I love you too!"

With that, the crowd surges back in on us. I quickly toss the microphone back to Dave, who catches it and makes his return to the stage. The show goes on; now with the audience granting me the respect of a VIP. I have no clue who among this crowd actually knows Dave, nor whether any of them understand how fortunate they are to witness him in his glory; what is clear, however, is how enraptured every single attendee is, enthralled by this almighty presence before them. In this moment, we are all so blessed.

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Commotion wakes me: the bus has arrived at my station, and passengers are preparing to disembark. I pick up my bag and step off; sure enough, there is my mom, beeping and waving from her car.

Tossing my stuff onto the backseat, I greet her. "Hi, Mom."

"Hello, dear! How was your trip?"

"Long," I reply, and as I settle into the passenger seat and buckle my seatbelt, I think back on my dreams. "But I slept through most of it."

She starts driving. "Your girlfriend couldn't come?"

"Well, maybe she could have, but it may have been odd for her. I mean, she didn't really know Dave at all, and I'm sure I'll be around enough people who did... I'll have Dan with me, for one, and he's already invited me to stay at his place afterward."

Dan's been a close friend of mine since grade school. I've known him almost as long as I knew Dave, and he has been equally important to me.

"How are things going between you two?" my mom asks.

"Alright; aside from calling him after I heard about Dave, we haven't really talked much since the last time I was home—oh, you meant... things are fine, I guess...." My answer noncommittally drifts away.

My mom makes an audible, "Hmm," so I quickly regain control of the conversation.

"It may have been nice to have her here, but I'll probably be an emotional mess from this, and Dan'll be better equipped to deal with me—with alcoholic support as much as a shoulder to cry on."

"Okay. Well, if after the concert anything changes, if you need me—for any reason—just call."

"Thanks, Mom."

Our conversation moves to more general topics until we arrive at her apartment—located on the main street of our small town, and a couple of blocks from the venue at

which the memorial concert will be held—at which point I flop onto the couch and distractedly text friends in an attempt to coordinate a bar meet-up for the night. My mother lends me a key, gives me a kiss, and tells me to be safe. I freshen myself up a bit, feeling quite disheveled from my day of traveling; and then I head out for what will most likely be my only night of fun during this trip.

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Bars used to make me nervous. Before I moved to a city—the real world—I had social anxiety issues. Now, whenever I visit my hometown, gathering everyone out for drinks is one of my top priorities. So it makes me glad, as I’m walking into one of my favorite pubs, to see my brother, Brian, already seated at the bar. It’s always easy spotting family; it’s even easier when they look exactly like you. People often confuse us for twins—he’s actually a few years younger than me—which is why no one thinks it odd when I sneak up behind him, grab his beer, and chug it before he even has the chance to shoot me a look of faux indignation and greet me with, “Hey, bro.”

“Looks like we’ll need another couple beers here!”

As I pull a stool up next to my brother, the bartender sets down two drafts.

“So, you’re in town for... that thing, right?” Brian asks.

“Yeah. It’s a concert at the theater down the road. You going?”

“I’m not sure if I’ll be able to make it but I’ll try to, for you. I never hung out with him, personally, and I really only knew him through you.”

“I know what you mean; I feel like this whole town only really knew *of* him.” I sip and savor the sweet taste of my beer before crossing that awkward line of brotherly sentimentality. “I would appreciate if you are able to make it.”

Brian simply nods in conclusive understanding and then raises another uncomfortable topic. “How’s living in Boston with your girlfriend?”

“Living in Boston’s great! But as for the other half... you know how, after mom and dad, we worry about the possibility of ending up with the wrong person and eventually falling out of—” I cut myself off as other friends arrive.

Surrounded by close friends, I proceed through the night with laughter—accompanied by round after round. Contrasting my rising inebriation, my attention span dwindles. When I reach the point where I’m too intoxicated to even fake concentration on conversation, I home in on a subtle feeling of personal contentment and give it a nice, big internalized hug.

Mostly everyone calls it a night earlier than desired—their alcohol-infused joy replaced with daily fatigue and exhaustion—leaving me once again alone with my brother, who offers up a game of pool in an effort to keep our good time going a little longer. I happily accept, and we take our drinks to the bar’s billiard room. Brian drops quarters into the table’s slot, and the balls come rolling down the chute, banging off one another—that familiar *crack!* makes me nostalgic for a time when Dave and I would hang out wherever we could find a decent pool table, and I drunkenly share the tales with my brother while he racks.

“It’s not like we were hustlers or anything—far from it.” I try to explain. “Dave was decent, but I’ve always sucked; I can’t wrap my mind around the geometry of the game. Dave *could*, but then again it probably just came naturally to him... seemed like

most things did.” I dwell on that for a moment. “He had an uncanny ability to pick up anything and damn near master it. I was always envious of that,” I digress. “But pool was always something we could share, along with the image we thought it gave us. We tried so hard to be *cool* teenagers, so we smoked a lot and hung out in any seedy place that had a billiard table. We did, eventually, graduate to more reputable pool halls, but that’s when Dave began playing for money... and started playing a lot more pool without me.”

My brother, seeing how I’m affecting myself, asks, “How you holding up, man?”

“I’m okay... still trying to deal with it all. Hope tomorrow helps get it all out.”

“Honestly, I’m surprised you came down for this thing. I thought you two had stopped talking or whatever.”

“No, we never really had a falling out or anything, just kinda grew apart. When I had to break off from a group of *friends* that were no good for me, he happened to get caught up in that. I never meant for it to happen, and I’ll tell you, I damn sure regret it now.”

Brian, perhaps understanding the emotional edge I’m teetering on, drops the conversation, takes a sip of his drink, and says, “You can break.”

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The story of my unintended split with Dave goes like this: I was young when my parents divorced, and owing to split custody, I attended two different high schools. It was tough, but I managed to maintain close relationships at both schools, including my friendship with Dave. When I fell for this girl Tara, however, I found it more difficult to sustain that balancing act. Hoping to reduce the number of ways I needed to split my time, I introduced the separate school groups to each other. They clicked, and new friendships were born. Some, unfortunately, were not in my best interest and led to outright betrayal. So I decided to cleanse my life of those who meant harm. Regrettably, Dave, having formed inextricable bonds with my former friends, got swept away as well. Eventually, Dave made his own choice to disconnect from them; but we had both moved on with our lives, never really attempting to restore what had been lost.

I know I’ll spend the rest of my life wishing I could go back and bridge that gap.

I pray Dave’s spirit will be present for his concert, and in some way, maybe, I’ll be given the chance to apologize.

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After taking care of our tab, I remind my brother how much it would mean to me if he can make it to the concert tomorrow and bid him a good night. Returning to my mother’s place, I let myself in as quietly as I can and drunkenly stumble to the couch.

Before I pass out, I check my phone for any messages; and I see a few texts from my girlfriend telling me how she hates the emptiness of our bed with me gone, and that she misses and loves me. I reply with a hopefully legible message and then let my phone drop to the floor. I pull the blanket my mom left out for me up to my neck and close my eyes; the room begins to spin. I try breathing deeply, but it doesn’t help.

My phone startles me when its text alert tone rings out in the quiet room. I presume the message is just another from my girlfriend, likely complaining at my

drunken texting; but as I'm too smashed to easily fall asleep, I blindly reach down and retrieve my phone.

"It's gonna b ok."

The message is from an unrecognized number; I figure it's probably a former friend—an old contact I had erased—who knew I was in town.

I type back, "Thanks, I know."

Switching my phone to silent, I let it fall to the floor yet again; but I'm not quite ready to reclose my eyes... and sure enough, a moment later, an intrusive glow illuminates the room.

"I'm here 4u I'll help u thru this."

I'm starting to feel ill at ease, but I respond. "Thanks, again, not sure who this is though, sorry."

This time I hold on to my phone, and though my eyelids grow heavy, the light and vibration of the next incoming text snaps them back open.

"U'll find out tmmrw."

Unsure what to make of their prolonged anonymity, I figure I'll let it be.

I think maybe I fell asleep clutching my phone, but when the vibration of another text comes, the time stamp shows only a couple of minutes have elapsed.

"U're not the only 1 who misses him but u sure seem 2b the worst."

The continued peculiarity of these messages pulls me back to an attentive state, and I try calling the number responsible... no answer, and I'm sent to a non-personalized voicemail. I hang up. I'm too drunk for this nonsense, but my head swims with possible identities for the perpetrator, causing me major anxiety—leading to nausea. I'm about to leap off the couch for the bathroom, when another text comes.

"Relax n sleep."

I can't explain why, but for some reason, I calm.

Knowing there isn't much else I *can* do, I replace my phone on the floor; and burying my head deep into a pillow so no light could further disturb me, I fall asleep.

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The theater's house lights come back up. Waking Amelia has finished their set and exited to back stage, leaving the audience clamoring for more. It becomes evident the show is over when security begins ushering attendees back toward the lobby. On the other side of the door, a table has been set up and loaded with band merchandise: CDs, t-shirts, and the like, printed with either the name or a sketch pattern of vines.

Tyree, the drummer, stands beside the table and guzzles one water bottle after another, his sweat-soaked beater shirt clinging to his dark skin. Beads of moisture pool atop his shaved head and run down his face; he continually wipes them from his eyes. He greets me with a damp but hardy handshake. "Thanks for finally coming out to see us."

"My pleasure. You guys fucking rocked!"

"Yeah, we were pretty damn good, right? It just sucks it took you so long to see us play. Especially after... well, you know."

My smile falters. "After?"

"Don't worry about it. He never held it against you, and he'd be glad you're here now."

“Wait. After what?”

“What do you mean, ‘After what?’ After Dave, man.”

“What are you talking about? He was *just* playing!” I glance around looking for support. “He was there, right? You all saw him, right?” Others nearby are looking at me with pity. I feel uneasy. “I don’t understand. Where is Dave, like, right now?”

Tyree merely shakes his head with concern.

Whatever everyone is implying is upsetting me. I need to see Dave, so I start pushing my way back into the theater, fighting against the exiting mob. The doorway appears much more distant than before, and people continue to pour out; the force of the crowd overpowers me. I’m knocked to the ground and instinctively curl up, covering my head. As assaulters stomp past my vulnerable body, I picture Dave standing over me, his aura of space providing a barrier to the flood—saving me from drowning beneath. Waves of feet pound hard; fortunately, none of them crash down on me, and the sounds of the stampede subside. All that’s left to hear is the pounding of my heart, blood pumping loudly in my ears.

I tentatively remove my arms from my head and observe the lobby carpet: empty. As I return to my feet, I notice the table has been knocked over; the band’s merchandise conspicuously missing. Everyone is gone and the lobby is a wreck, as though this were a party that’s been raided and abandoned. The theater door stands clear and ajar; I consider the possibility that I might not like what I’ll find should I cross its threshold again, but I also know I cannot retreat from the truth.

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The theater has now been entirely vacated, save for one lone figure in the pit.

Tyree, his back to me, is pressed against the platform, arms resting on the wood, and gazing toward center stage. He must have anticipated I would join him, because he does not startle when I approach and speak. “It *was* really him, right?”

Tyree does not reply—he does not even look at me—so I continue.

“When everyone disappeared from the lobby, I thought maybe I imagined you all, this whole thing.” I mimic his stance, placing my arms to rest on the stage and looking up toward the center—to where I first saw Dave appear. “I had to come back to check, to see for myself.”

Tyree remains unresponsive; I’m beginning to feel invisible.

“I’m getting the impression something’s fucked up here.”

“No kidding,” he finally retorts.

I’m also getting the distinct impression Tyree is not going to help me. “How come you’re the only one still here? Where did Micah go?”

Suddenly, Tyree vaults onto the stage and offers down his hand. “I’ll show you, but you’re not going to like this.”

“Whatever.” I swat his hand away and clamber up on my own. “I just want to know what the hell is going on, and you’re being super weird.”

Once on the stage, I pause for a moment and turn around. I picture a packed auditorium, the lights turned down, a guitar in my hands, a microphone standing before me, my closest friends backing me up, and the feeling I have all the power in the world. I strike a pose and strum an air guitar.

I hear a snicker from behind me, and Tyree says, “I’m the one being weird? Really?”

“Shut-up.”

I shake loose the fantasy and follow Tyree across the stage to the darkness in the back. The house lights don’t seem to cast back here, and I can’t see anything; I trust Tyree will direct me at some point or at least prevent me from smacking into the back wall... but we continue on for what feels an abnormal distance, so I stop and turn to look back.

We are standing in a void of blackness, as though floating in space without the light of any stars—except, as if through a small window, the view back out into the theater hangs in the distance.

I spin around, trying to spot Tyree. I can sense he is there, but I can’t see him. “Where the fuck—”

His voice comes from nearby, “Should we keep walking?”

“I want answers!”

“Then come on.”

I can hear Tyree walking away, almost aggressively moving farther from the only sight of existence. Without much choice, I continue to follow, though the emptiness below my feet makes me nervous.

After a while, it’s only my own footsteps I hear; so I stop again. “You still with me?”

From behind me comes, “Yes,” and I turn around.

“Whoa!” The window of the stage is nearly indiscernible; I can barely make out a pinpoint of light—a whiteness the size of a grain of salt—in the all-consuming blackness.

Tyree’s voice comes from right beside me; perhaps he’s looking back as well when he says, “Okay, final decision time: do you want to continue on and lose your point of origin, or have you decided the truth really isn’t worth that much after all?”

“I’m not entirely sure I believe that there are answers out here, but I’m absolutely positive I’m not going to find *any* back there; so I guess I’d rather hold hope in nothing than be lost in everything.”

Tyree’s arm wraps around my shoulder, and he spins me away from the light, facing me back into the direction we’ve been heading. “How poetic,” he flatly comments, and then he pushes me sharply forward. “Tool.”

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I stumble forward and completely lose my footing. Throwing out my arms to break my fall, I brace for impact; but then I pass beyond the horizontal plane of where my feet were standing. I’ve been shoved right over an imperceptible edge, and I’m free-falling into darkness. I’m not scared, though, because something about the way Tyree had led me to this point strikes me as similar to when a friend leads you into your own surprise party. I’m ready for the lights to switch; I’m ready to be surprised.

I abruptly land, flat-out, on top of a solid surface, my head hitting hard and bouncing. My vision is speckled with blurry stars; their white lights flare out, grasp one another, and pull, stretching their diamond shapes, expanding and taking over the darkness. I rise to my knees in a daze as the white continues to grow, eventually erasing

all but one inky-looking black splotch somewhere high above me. I'm staring up at it, mouth agape in wonder, when that last remaining point of blackness unexpectedly falls like a rain drop... and lands right on my tongue.

The taste is severely bitter, and I try to spit the substance out; but it has already slid down my throat. I double over and begin to cough, violently. I feel an obstruction choking me, and I reach my hands up to my neck—an instinctual sign for help.

And then I hear a voice, Micah's, who says, "Dave is gone."

My hands still expressing their plea from around my gagged throat, I look up to see him standing over me. His eyes are hidden behind his straight, dark hair draping over his long, pale face. To match his black ensemble, he holds ebony candles out horizontally, their flames somehow burning straight, pointing at me like fingers. Wax from both candles drips to the ground, and the pools, like a Rorschach, take shape and meaning in my mind: two figures standing outside of a building—Micah steps into part of the wax with his boot, destroying the building and smearing one of the figures away.

"You need to realize that, and deal with it," he tells me. Then, as he opens his hands and lets the candles fall, he adds, "We all do."

Breathless, and with the world beginning to fade, I release my hands from around my neck and make a feeble attempt to catch the burning candles. I feel the fire lick my palms as the black sticks slip by. Upon hitting the ground, both candles roll into the melted wax of the remaining figure; the flames—and I—are instantly snuffed out—suffocated.

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"You okay?" asks my mom, concerned, as I snap awake and sit up, desperately inhaling. Once I catch my breath, wipe the panicked tears from my eyes, and lie back down, she follows with, "Bad dream?"

"I'm not sure.... What time is it?"

"It's pretty late; you slept through most of the day. I thought about waking you a couple times, but you seemed pretty out of it, and I know you have a tough night ahead."

"You don't know the half of it." I proceed to explain about the creepy texts from last night as I retrieve my phone from the floor and scroll through—paying little attention to the new message from my girlfriend wishing me a good morning—and share the odd conversation with my mother.

She offers a rational suggestion, "Try not to worry yourself too much over it. It's probably somebody you deleted. An ex-girlfriend, maybe?"

"Maybe, but something about these messages seems intentionally unsettling."

"Well just remember, tonight is supposed to be about Dave, and needs to be your time to grieve. Don't you let anyone, or anything, disturb that."

"You're right. Thanks, Ma."

I while away the rest of the afternoon: eating a late but sizable lunch, freshening up for my evening out, and speaking with my girlfriend over the phone. Our conversation is short and forced: She tells me about her day as I halfheartedly listen, and I briefly talk about drinking with my brother. I do not tell her about the mysterious texts. She says, "I love you," and I return the sentiment; and then I hang up first.

I take a deep breath. I hug my mom. It is time to go.

## II. Memorial

A crowd of emo kids fills the sidewalk outside the concert venue—a converted retro theater that’s now “the scene” for no-name local bands. Boys wearing girl-cut jeans pout beside girls with purposefully positioned bangs obscuring a single eye; all of them look as if they’re wearing eyeliner, and all of them have to be at least ten years younger than me. I feel so old. In my ritualistic show-going youth, the experience was about the release of pent up aggression and camaraderie through contact; for these kids it’s isolation and a lament over the opposite sex not liking you. I just don’t get it.

I spot Dan, his clean-cut appearance and plaid, button-up shirt sticking out like a sore thumb amid all the shaggy hair and dark clothes; and I work my way through the crowd to join him.

He greets me with, “What the hell, when did we become the old guys?”

“I know, right.”

“Some of these kids look young enough to be my students. Do you think they even know what they are here for?”

“No idea. Guess they knew Dave *somehow*; he *was* doing a lot of promotional stuff with new bands in the area.”

In one of the last conversations I had with Dave, he mentioned getting involved with that kind of work. Looking around at all these strangers, I wish I had learned more about what he’d been up to. To stave off the onset of guilt, I take out my phone, intending to text my brother; but I discover a new message from that unknown number.

“Try 2 enjoy the show I’ll come find u later.”

I wonder whether whoever sent the text is here, standing nearby all creepily casual; and I immediately hit the call contact button.

Dan, not really paying attention, asks, “So, you crashing at my place tonight?”

“Most likely,” I reply while holding the phone near my ear. “We’ll see how things go.”

I strain to hear any sort of ringtone over the raucous crowd. I scan, hoping to catch someone even so much as glance at their cell, giving themselves away. Would it be an old friend, and we’d laugh at the scare they gave me; or perhaps an enemy, who has been enjoying this small torture; or maybe it was one of these random kids, someone who had been close to Dave in some unknown way? Discovery must surely be within my grasp... but then the theater doors open and everyone starts pushing in.

I’m about to hang up, but then the ringing in my ear ceases.

An unfamiliar and barely audible female voice says, “One thing at a time. Just go in.”

The call ends.

Dan notices the unnerved look on my face. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing... yet,” I say, sighing; and we enter the building.

The lobby is a reminder of what this place once was and of days since passed: the crimson carpet is ripped, scarred, and frayed; the ivory walls have been stained nearly as brown as their borders; and the wooden concession counter doesn't so much stand as it does hunker, crooked nails coming loose along the edges. Opposite the main entrance, two sets of arching doors are roped off with cords of ruby red velvet strung between golden stands.

The crowd spreads out over the lobby. Dan and I stand against a side wall by the entrance, waiting for anyone we may know to show up. I remember my intention to text my brother and finally do so: it's a simple text, something along the lines of him getting his ass over here.

I'm getting antsy—not because it is very probable that someone in this crowd is stalking me, but because I want the concert to begin already. I'm eager to see how those involved are going to pay an appropriate tribute to Dave, and I long to get this grief out, to uncork what is bottled up inside. For now, I'm distracted with thoughts of my tormentor. I try to inconspicuously get a read on people, but I'm not very good at it: I either catch the eye of someone I know—now that they've started to arrive—and receive a sympathetic, “How ya holding up?” look; or else I'm staring down a stranger and feeling awkward when inevitably caught.

One young girl catches my gaze, and even after I avert my eyes, she continues to curiously look at me; it's making me feel weird. I'm probably old enough to be her... well, her much older brother. I can tell she's still eyeing me up—I can feel it. I glance back, and this time she smiles shyly and quickly turns away, leaving me to stare at the back of her gray hoodie—sadly, a few sizes too baggy that it obstructs what could possibly be an attractive view. An oblong black bag runs up the short length of her spine to the base of her sweatshirt's hood, raised up to cover her head. I want to keep my eyes on her, hoping she'll peek back; but then the rope barricade is removed and the arched doors swing open, allowing the crowd to officially enter the auditorium.

This place feels familiar; though, I've never been here before. The room is long and narrow. Two aisles separate three sections of seating with rows and rows of chairs. Below the raised stage lies the pit area with doors on both sides, likely leading to the private balcony seats above them. The theater is dimly lit, and though the stage is currently dark, the bare essentials for a performance can be made out: a drum kit sits slightly off-center in the back, some amps and other electronics are scattered across the platform, and a microphone stands tall and alone at the head of the stage.

I feel an irrational sense of terror I don't quite understand.

Dan selects seats for us a couple of rows back from the pit, but I'm feeling much too anxious to sit yet; so I pull out my phone to see whether Brian responded. There is a message, only not from my brother.

“Relax u're fine :)”

I survey the people filling the theater—the age range is actually wider than I originally thought: kids cram into the pit, our peers grab seats in the front rows, and a few older folks settle into the back. Spotting some high school friends, I toss up a friendly wave; but when they veer into a row of seats, the young girl from the lobby appears from behind them. She probably thinks I'm waving at her, and she keeps an eye on me as she quickens her pace, passing by and disappearing into the mob of kids in the pit.

When some guys come out on stage to do sound checks, Dan takes that as a cue to grab us beers from the lobby's concession stand—to which I wholeheartedly agree. Shortly after he returns with our drinks, an emcee takes the stage.

“How's everyone doing out there tonight?”

He gets a murmur of a response.

“Tonight is a special night. We are here to honor the memory of someone very close to us. Some of you may not know who Dave was, or how he influenced so much of the music scene around here, but you should know that a night like tonight wouldn't even be possible if it hadn't been for him. I ask that, even if you didn't know Dave, you join us now in a moment of silence....”

I bow my head and close my eyes. I can hear soft mutterings from kids who clearly have no idea what's going on here. It makes me angry.

“Thank you. Now, let's honor Dave the way he's meant to be, the way he'd want it: with some kick-ass music!”

Cheering rises up as the first band makes their entrance.

I quickly drain my beer, and as the band plays through their set—a mess of passionless whining that the kids in the pit bob their heads to—Dan gladly takes the opportunity to escape for a moment and buy us more drinks. When he returns, I'm glad to see he is accompanied by my brother. Brian squeezes past to take the seat on my other side and apologizes for being late. The three of us concentrate on our beers, trading off refill duty, until the first band wraps up and exits the stage.

When the second band comes out, my attention is instantly drawn to the guitarist's *Legend of Zelda* life-bar t-shirt. While I stare at the iconic imagery, my mind replays a treasured memory....

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Back in grade school, the summer before sixth grade, I attended a seasonal recreation program on the school grounds—basically camp without all that woods and cabins nonsense. I was sitting on a bench outdoors, fidgeting with my stupid lightning bolt earring—a gift from my mom to make me *less* of a geek—when I happened to see some kid reading a *Nintendo Power* magazine.

*Sweet!* I thought. *Someone I can relate to.*

So I approached him and simply started talking about video games, and the two of us soon were swapping tips and tricks for all the games we knew. Our conversation held steady on one game in particular: an epic adventure called *The Legend of Zelda: A Link to the Past*.

We would come to play this game together, on multiple occasions, throughout our lives; and we would treasure that bond. But right then, in that moment, at that crappy summer camp thing, the game was still as new to us as we were to each other.

I asked his name.

“Dave,” he said. “Nice to meet you.”

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“Oh, come on. This band’s not *that* bad.” Dan says.

I crack a half-smile at him and wipe the moisture from my eyes.

By the time the third band takes the stage, the focus of the evening starts to swing a lot more toward Dave—some of the members of this band had actually been friends with him. During a quick tune-up, the band’s frontman takes a minute to say a few words about Dave and their shared love for music. The crowd in the pit shifts around as some of the younger kids find seats and attendees closer to my age move up.

When the band begins, they slam into a fury of loud, fast rock riffs that are much more to my taste. I stand up and move out to the aisle, giving myself a little more room to get into the performance, when the power suddenly cuts out.

My body seizes up in the pitch black, yet I feel an odd sensation of falling.

Security lights flick on, and people on stage scuttle around checking the equipment. When the house lights return, the sound system also kicks back on and feedback squeals out. While the band rapidly runs another sound test, the lead grabs the mic; and with a grin, he says, “Hey, how about a big hand for Dave showing up?”

The crowd goes nuts at the suggestion, and I join in; knowing how much Dave loved to be the center of attention, it’s easy to imagine him killing the noise, made in his honor, just to announce his own presence.

The band leaps back into the song they had been playing, and the crowd jumps right in with them. I, however, am caught up in what transpired, my thoughts trapped with the notion Dave may be here with us.

My mind keeps repeating the words, “I’m sorry.”

As if to trespass on my apology, that young girl chooses now to walk up the aisle and pass close by again. Although she’s looking at me, this time she does not smile; and she does not turn away when I meet her eyes. And being *this* close—mere inches as she steps by—I’m given a chance to actually look *into* her eyes: they are a wonderfully warm caramel color, and I find gazing into them both sweet and addictive. She breaks eye contact after she passes, and I’m almost compelled to follow her....

Dan punches me in the arm, breaking the snare. “Who’s the girl? Someone you know?” he shouts over the music.

Brian snorts out his beer as he rushes to glance around and ask, “What girl? Is she hot?”

“No! I mean, no, I’ve never seen her before! She looks young! She’s...,” I hesitate before answering Brian’s question, “I don’t know... I guess, probably... yes, she’s hot!” I had to concede: what I’ve seen, I’ve liked.

“Well, be careful, bro; looks like a gamble on jail time with some of these girls here!”

Dan, returning to the matter of importance, suggests, “The way she was looking at you, maybe *she* knows *you*!”

“Maybe...!”

During the applause after the conclusion of the current band’s final song, a red curtain is drawn across the head of the stage. I barely notice and hardly clap; I’m still distractedly considering the unspoken attraction between myself and the strange girl. The coincidence of a girl’s voice answering when I called the unknown number crosses my

mind, and to no one in particular, I blurt out, “I wonder if it’s been *her* sending me those weird texts!”

Dan asks, “What texts?”

I take out my phone to show him but discover its battery is dead. “What the hell? I swear this had a full charge!”

Pre-recorded instrumental music softly plays, and a projection screen lowers, using the curtain as a backdrop.

Dan places a hand on my shoulder and says, “Try not to worry about it right now.”

A slideshow begins: pictures of Dave slowly transition on the screen. At this point *all* the young kids clear the pit—either having no idea or not caring—and the rest of Dave’s friends and acquaintances move up to refill the space. Dan and I join them, and Brian follows.

Through the snapshots, an aggrandized man shares snippets of his life; and the consistency of those soulful eyes paired with that Cheshire cat grin—a complementary contradiction—is returned with the sincerity of tear streaked faces.

I have no idea where some of these pictures had been taken—memories I’d missed out on—but when the slideshow loops, I can’t help but feel bothered by something... and it hits me when one specific slide cycles back around: Of the few pictures from Dave’s youth, there is only one that includes me; but it isn’t even just the two of us. The possibility my relationship with Dave—one of the most important friendships of my life—could be reduced to one bit part in a group photo sickens me.

I sicken myself and quickly resent having this selfish thought. Here. Now.

The slideshow ends, the music stops, the screen raises, and the curtains part.

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There they are. Micah tilts the neck of his guitar in a nonverbal greeting to his audience, but the look on his face speaks of the distance he must feel. Kevin distractedly tweaks the knobs on his bass, possibly to delay the musical eulogy they are about to offer. Tyree, seated behind his drums, is poised to attack the kit, his anger at loss clearly visible.

The microphone, along with its stand, is gone. And the band is acutely aware of the absence.

A fourth person *is* on the stage: he’s a younger guy, dressed much more conservatively than the rest of the band but unquestionably holding the same shared grief. I remember him, Jason, from Dave’s church. He’s partly obscured behind a pair of stacked keyboards, on which, once silence falls, he begins to play a solemn tune.

Jason masterly plays out his passage, but he isn’t playing for us; and though we all raptly listen, we can perceive the voice behind the sound—a voice speaking directly to Dave. We are eavesdroppers, and so we strongly hold our silence, for fear of breaking this intimate moment between the soul of the musician and the spirit of his lost friend.

The drums start to lightly fill sections of the epic melody playing out before us, and then percussion and keys are accompanied by long, steady bass notes. Micah stands on—hands white-knuckled around his guitar while tears wash the distance from his eyes—until, finally, he strums out a chilling coup de grâce, ending the piece.

And I fall to my knees, blinded by my own tears and deafened by the echoes of my own sobs in the silence. Somebody lifts me into their arms. I'm being carried.

"Thank you," I say deliriously.

Then the chilliness of the night air emotionally sobers me like a stinging slap to the face, and as the oversized security guard gently sets me down on the sidewalk, he says, "Not a problem. Folks on the floor become a safety issue, and you looked like you could use some air. Take a breather."

I heed his advice, and while I'm getting a grip, my brother steps outside.

"What happened?" Brian asks.

"I don't know. I guess I just wasn't anticipating *that*."

"You gonna be able to handle going back in? I can't imagine it's going to get any easier on you."

"Yeah, I'll be fine; don't worry."

"Alright, well, listen, Dan's still in there, but I'm going to take off now... if that's cool?"

"I understand. Thanks for coming out."

My brother gives me a one-armed guy hug and then punches me on the shoulder. "Take care of yourself, bro," he says as he leaves.

After the bouncer is sure I've recomposed myself, he allows me to reenter the building.

I take a few steps across the lobby before I mentally stumble over an unexpected sight: Tara—the sleeves of her sweater pulled up, one slender arm matronly positioned on the curve of her hip, and the other holding the arched theater door ajar. She's short enough that I can see over her pixyish hair and down to the stage, the guys still performing behind her. She steadily peers at me over the thin, rectangular frame of her glasses, waiting to catch my eye. When she does, she does not smile; why would she? I must have been mistaken to think I saw relief on her face, because she then turns around and lets the door close behind her.

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It's probable my lost friendship with Dave may be Tara's fault.

And it's possible she may know I believe it is.

She and I had been long-time friends, but she had known Dave too. There was even a span of time when the three of us hung out together often. But that fateful mistake of introducing all my close friends—the groups from separate schools—well, that also ended badly in regard to her.

Dave had not been the only one influenced; however, the way in which Tara had been corrupted afflicted me so much worse. She had been my friend, then became my girlfriend, and eventually even became my fiancée; but she betrayed me. So when I had made that choice to cleanse my life of maleficence, to step out of the shadows of circling vultures, she was the catalyst.

Perhaps, someday, I might find it in myself to forgive her many offenses; but I will never forget that her actions and choices set into motion the eventual disintegration of my relationship with my best friend.

I made myself let Tara go, but Dave had been taken from me.

And I haven't spoken with her in more than half a decade.  
So what the hell is this? Why would she come looking for me? Does she care?  
As if she'd be capable of such a thing.

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For some inexplicable reason, I feel intensely curious about Tara's motives.

I open the right hand door to the auditorium—the same side she had held open while simultaneously blocking my path—and at that same moment, the left hand door swings; and sharing the threshold with me is the mysterious, young girl.

We both hesitate, and I examine her a little more closely. Her caramel eyes are sensuously feline in shape. Her gray hood is up, but I can see her dirty blond hair pulled tight behind her lobe-to-tip pierced ears. Her sharp nose is slightly upturned, with a light dusting of freckles crossing its bridge and over her cheeks. Her naturally pink lips are currently set in a hard, concerned expression; and her modestly protruding chin is projecting a clear determination. She's quite a bit shorter than me, but contrasting our respective emotional states, I feel as if she towers above me.

I break the captured moment first with a childlike smile, as if to say, "Hello, pretty girl!" She does not return the expression, and her gaze turns toward the lobby. I feel embarrassed, as though I've made a fool of myself; but then she walks forward, slides her hand into mine, and tugs me toward the exit.

I do not know this girl, nor why she would lead me away; but I feel it burning inside me: I want to—no, I *need* to follow her. My mind does not debate the choice; my body does not fight the action. Instead, I focus on her black backpack and the intriguing patch sewn to it: a set of feathery white wings.

## **END OF SAMPLE**

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