

***Screech!***

I grit my teeth. “Sage!” The god-awful violin sound continues from behind my closed door. I yell again, “Sage!” No response. “Why I otta.... First Mom ends up in the hospital with COVID, and now this?” I bang my fists on my desk and slam my laptop shut. Holding onto the edge of the desk, I force my chair back, the wheels marking up the already damaged wooden floor.

I can’t deal with this right now. I have too much going on between Mom and my manuscript. Mom was feeling fine, then two days later, she had a fever of 102 and difficulty breathing. She was admitted to Memorial Hermann in Memorial City that afternoon, the same hospital Dad works at. A week later, she was hooked up to a ventilator. My hopes were on the floor because, from what everyone kept saying, patients hooked up to vents rarely came off.

I storm to my bedroom door with my hand on the handle when I realize: I just very viciously slammed the only item that contains my manuscript. I rush back to my desk and slowly open my laptop. I let out a sigh of relief. *Not damaged. It’s still there.* I close it gently this time and proceed to storm out of my room, across the living room, and stand in Sage’s open doorway; my rage muffling the sound of her dying violin.

I stand in the doorway, waiting for her to notice me. When she doesn’t, I cover my ears and yell very loudly, “Sage!” She stops playing.

Her arms go limp, the violin dangling from her hands. “Yes, Orwell, what is it?”

“How many times have I told you to close your door when you practice your violin?”

“Many times.”

“And how many times have you listened?”

“None, which makes me wonder why you continue to try.” Sage sets down her violin and takes a seat in her vibrant blue hanging rope chair.

She put her fingertips to the wall and pushes, spinning around, making the netting up top twist tightly, and the force of it turns her the other way. She continues to let the chair do this until it stops on its own.

While she does this, I look around her room covered in personal artwork, cartoons cut out from the *New Yorker*, and other images of picturesque settings from magazines. I look closely at one drawing of two hands. Presumably a woman and man.



“Did you draw this or trace it?” I ask, as I look closer at the drawing. A few faint sketch marks suggest she drew it herself, but Sage is known to trace drawings she finds online.

“Sadly, that one is traced. I tried free handing it, but the hands were so close and intertwined that I had a tough time figuring out which finger belonged on which hand. So, I gave up and just traced it.”

I nod and glance at a *New Yorker* cartoon a few images away and chuckle.

Sage gets out of her hanging chair and walks over to where I am standing.

I turn to look at her. She is half a head shorter than me at 5’9”, she is closer in height to me than most people since I’m 6’5”, an inch taller than my dad. This month her hair is strawberry blonde, cut into short layers to show off her natural curls. However, at the moment, her hair is more waves than curls.

“Can I help you with something?” She interrupts my thoughts, and I blink.

“Ah, um, yes. Yes, you can. Can you please, *please* close your door when you practice that incessant instrument? Please? I’m asking nicely.” I grin a wide grin and clasp my hands together, begging.

She shrugs. “I’ll try to remember.”

“Thank you!” I lift my clasped hands to the heavens.

“But don’t come barging in here with that negative energy again, or I’ll practice right outside your door.” Her normally sky-blue eyes turned cloudy as she says this. “I’ve gotten rather good at playing horribly.” Sage gives a sly smile before turning to sit back in her hanging chair. She grabs her sketchbook and pencils and starts to draw something.

I haven’t moved, so she looks up at me and makes a shooing motion with her hand. “You may leave.”

I look around before turning and walking back across the living room and into my bedroom. I stand just inside the doorway to my room, running my hand through my tawny hair. My room is the image of perfection with my bed made, organized dresser, nightstand, and closet, and my desk reserved for creativity. I look between my closed laptop and my bed. I sigh and trudge back toward my desk, plopping back into my chair. I need to finish this book!

I start to type. *It’s the dead of night when the doorbell rings.* That is as far as I get before my mind wanders back to Mom laying in the hospital, with that tube down her throat, and—ach! I can’t stand it! I am what you might call a “Momma’s Boy.” We just get each other, you know? She is an English teacher at Cypress Ranch High School, so I always asked her for writing advice. Heck, even early on in writing my manuscript, I asked her for advice, that is, until she

got COVID. Writing is the one instance when she won't sugarcoat things just because I'm her son, and I liked that.

I spun the chair to face the bed, stand, walked to the foot of my bed, jump, and land spread eagle on my stomach, my face buried in the pillows. I let out a groan and turn my head to the side so I can breathe.

Why are manuscripts so hard? I made a list of things I wanted to accomplish after I graduated college.

1. Get a job

Check. I have a job working at The University of Houston's library. I love my job; I get to be around books all day and rarely talk to people. I hate human interaction, especially with students who are visiting for the first time. They act like they have never been inside a library before. I'm sure students have been inside a Barnes and Noble before. It's like a library, except that it has dozens of copies of the same books; and they sometimes reconfigure the store's layout. Okay, so maybe that's a poor analogy, but still. Students should not be afraid of the library. When I first visited the university library, I got lost and had no clue where I was. I loved the feeling of being lost amongst books, now I get to do it all the time!

2. Get an apartment

Check. I wanted a place close enough to campus to ride my bike to work if I wanted to. That's how I ended up two and a half miles from campus at Camden McGowen Station Apartments. The place is excellent, except for one thing. All they had available were two-bedroom apartments. This led me to number three.

3. Get a roommate

Check. I'm very meticulous about my space and like to keep things neat and orderly. However, back in college, my roommate sophomore year did not concur. He moved out of the dorm after three weeks because I was "too clean." Like there's such a thing. Sorry, I cleaned your room while you were out. I thought I was doing you a service. Whoever can live in such filth for such an extended period of time, I have no idea.

I have some strict rules when it comes to who I want my roommate to be. They have to be clean, friendly, orderly, have money (because I sure can't afford this place on my own), non-smoker, not a heavy drinker, and no drugs. I should have put somewhere in there: non-bad musician, because when I met Sage Beatle for the first time, she forgot to mention that along with her parents being well-to-do, she has been practicing the violin in the hopes of someday joining the Houston Symphony. Yeah, my mistake. Now I'm stuck with her, but she has money, so... I'm trying, I'm really trying here with the violin, the practicing, and the screeching. It has put a dent in my timeline on my last goal.

#### 4. ☆Write my first novel☆

No check. Let's see, it's June 12, 2020, and I started writing on September 20, 2019. In the beginning, I had made fantastic progress. Then the pandemic hit. You'd think a global catastrophe like COVID-19, which forced everyone to wear masks, social distance, and stay inside, would be a great way to force myself to write. You would be mistaken.

In March, when word was out that the virus had reached Houston, community colleges, universities, and all schools extended spring break to two weeks. When people realized that COVID wasn't going away, teachers, professors, everyone turned to the internet. Classes were online, but thankfully the library remained open, so I was saved from finding another job.

After being cooped up inside all the time, only to go out for groceries and occasionally interact with the outside world to remind myself I am alive, writing has gotten boring.

I flipp onto my back, let out a long dramatic sigh, and swing my legs over the side of the bed. I look at my laptop, then out the window. A thought pops into my head: *Mom*. I shove my feet into my sneakers and grab my phone and mask from the dresser.

“I’m going outside for a bit,” I call to Sage, walking through the kitchen to the apartment’s front door. I put on my mask and leave the apartment. I take the stairs so I can at least feel good about eating tons of junk food later. Once outside, I look around for any sign of life, before taking off my mask and calling Dad on FaceTime. A few seconds pass, then my face is replaced by his, behind a face shield and mask.

Before I can say anything, Dad asks, “Why aren’t you wearing your mask?” Concern in his green eyes.

“Hello to you too, Dad. Don’t worry, I’m outside, and there’s no one around.” I flipped the camera around to show him. Flipping it back, I say, “I’m staying safe, don’t worry about me.”

I can tell his is frowning from behind his mask. “Mmmm, okay. Just know that I worry about you.”

“I just said not to worry about me. Worry about your patients. Speaking of which, how’s Mom doing?”

“You know the rules,” he moves through the hospital hallways. “Mom’s not my patient because we are not—”

“—allowed to treat family members, I know, I know, but you’re there, she’s there, you can look out for her this way, which lessens my ever-present anxiety.”

Dad walks into a patient room, and I catch a glimpse of the name outside the door: Emma Lancaster. He flips the camera around to show Mom hooked up to a ventilator with other wires and tubes snaking around her hospital bed. Her silky-smooth tawny hair frames her face. “Her O2 needs are steadily dropping. Right now, she’s at 87 percent, which is better than what it was two days ago. If she keeps this up, she might be off the vent sooner rather than later.”

I nodd. “Okay, what else can you tell me? What are her other stats like?”

“Uh, let’s see here.” Dad’s head moves out of the frame to get a better look at the monitor. “Her pulse is 98, BP is 120 over 80 with a respiratory rate of 15, and her temperature is 99.5, which is better.” He turns back to the phone. “I’m hopeful. If her numbers get better today, then she might be able to come off the vent tomorrow.”

I let out a breath I didn’t know I was holding and smile as I let my hopes rise a little higher. It’s nice to have a nurse in the family. That way, we don’t have to spend hundreds or thousands of dollars on hospital bills; we just go to Dad.

“Nurse William Lancaster to the nurse’s station. Nurse William Lancaster to the nurse’s station, please,” a voice over the hospital PA announced.

Dad gives a slight tilt of the head, “I gotta go, kiddo. Stay safe and wear your mask. I love you.”

“Love you too.” We hang up before I realize I forgot to tell Mom I love her. I guess that’s okay; I’ll get to tell her in person soon enough.

I headed back into the building, and when I open the door, an irritating *screech* meets my ears. I grimace in annoyance and quickly close the door before our neighbors start to complain. Like always, Sage has her bedroom door open. I ignore it and head to my bedroom, closing the

door to muffle the sound of a dying cat. I sit down at my desk, open my laptop, and pull up my manuscript. *Okay, time to write.* I stretch my arms and put my fingers to the keys.

*...followed by an incessant knocking on the door. Alister turns the porch light on and opens the door to find his sister...*

That is all I can come up with before the creative well of my brain goes dry. I have yet to find a name for Alister's sister. An entire book with *Name* as a filler the entire way through. Nothing seemed to fit, and it will stay that way until I can figure out a name that did fit. I groan and spin around in my leather-backed chair to face the window. I sit up a little straighter as an idea sparks to life in my mind. I close my laptop for the millionth time and reach for my shoulder bag; putting some pens, pencils, and a journal inside. I grab my mask, phone, and wallet from the dresser.

"I'm going on an excursion!" I announce to Sage over her violin.

I make my way to the front door as the violin stops, and Sage's head pops out of her room. "An excursion? Hold on, let me grab my camera."

I wait by the door as Sage grabs her camera bag. She comes out of her room hopping on one foot, trying to get her left shoe on. Once she is ready, she stands with fists on her hips. "Let's go on an excursion!"

We put our masks on and walk out the door and down three flights of stairs. Standing outside our apartment complex, I close my eyes, lift a finger, and spin in a circle. I slow down and stop, opening my eyes. "We're going to Baldwin Park."

Sage nods, and we start walking. On the walk down Elgin Street, Sage pulls out her camera and takes candid shots of the people and businesses on either side of the street. She takes a candid photo of me as I pass under the walkway connecting two HCC buildings. As we

approach Houston Fire Station 7 on Austin Street, Sage drops to the ground and stretches her head and camera up to the station to get a photo.

I shake my head, “You will do anything for a shot, won’t you?”

She gets up and looks at her camera screen, checking the photos. She looks up at me, smiling. “Yep.”

We continue walking. Sage only sacrificing her outfit one more time before we arrive at Baldwin Park.

Once at the park, Sage makes a beeline toward the biggest tree and starts to climb. I, on the other hand, stay safely on the ground and sit beneath the tree that Sage climbs just in case she falls.

I pull out my journal and pen and write down everything I see from my spot under the twisted tree, letting my surroundings spark my creativity.

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Sage and I end up spending two hours at Baldwin Park. Me writing and Sage climbing, taking precarious photos from the tops of trees.

When we get back to the apartment, Sage goes to her room to upload her photos, and I go to mine to look for inspiration in what I had written.

I sit in bed, flipping through my journal. I don’t know when, but at some point, I fall asleep with my journal on my chest.

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I am still asleep the following day when Sage walks into my room, “Did you know your name is the words, ‘or’ and ‘well’ combined?”

I sit up and make a weird sound in response; my journal tumbling off my chest onto the bed. I rub my eyes and pat down my hair, removing the bedhead look. I turn to Sage. “What was that?”

She leans against the doorframe and repeats her statement.

“Yeah... it’s also the name of a famous author, George Orwell. That’s why my parents named me Orwell. They are both fascinated by his book *1984*. I’m just glad they named me Orwell and not George, doesn’t have a unique ring to it.”

Sage looks at her paint-splattered Converse, then back up at me. “Are you okay? I heard about you mom. Is she getting any better?”

I let out a sigh as the weight of my reality grows heavier on my shoulders. “My dad said that she should be coming off the vent soon.”

“Good. That’s good news.”

When I don’t reply, she comes to sit on the edge of my messy bed and waves her hand in my face.

“Hm? Oh, yeah that’s good.” I tried to smile, but it didn’t stick, “I’m just... I feel like I’m being pulled in two different directions. One is at my desk to finish my manuscript and the other is at my mom’s bedside,” I stand up, “but I can’t be at her bedside because family aren’t allowed in the COVID ward, so I can’t do anything besides be worried and anxious!”

Sage quickly gets up and puts her hands on my shoulders. “Hey, hey, Orwell. Calm down. It’s okay, just breathe. Everything will work itself out.” She pulls me in and holds me tight.

My breathing slows, and I can feel the flush in my face reseeding. “Thank you, Sage, I needed that.”

We separate and she smiles, “Anytime” before leaving my room.

My phone starts to buzz in my pocket. I fish it out and look at the caller ID. *The hospital.* Dad never calls me from the hospital line. *It must be about Mom.* Before I can answer, my phone goes black. I press the power button, and the dead battery symbol appears. *I forgot to charge it last night.* I dash out of the apartment and make my way to my silver four-door in the parking garage. I make a U-turn under Katy Freeway, turning right onto Frostwood Drive, and pull into the parking garage. I make sure to grab my mask before I run down the stairs to the sky bridge. I reach the information desk out of breath and pull out my ID while asking which room I can find Emma Lancaster because I am her son, and I got a call from the hospital.

The woman at the desk furrows her brow, “Did you happen to answer the call that you received from the hospital?”

I grimace. “Well you see, I was about to when my phone died, so I never got to answer it.” I bounced on the balls of my feet.

The woman looks at me with sad eyes, “Let me call your father.”

I’m baffled, but I take a seat in one of the lobby chairs as the receptionist calls Dad.

“Yes ... yes, he’s here ... No, he doesn’t... Okay, yes sir. I’ll keep him here ... Okay, see you in a bit.” She hangs up. “Your father is on his way down.”

I keep my gaze fixed on the bank of elevators and I start to shake my leg in inpatients, running a hand through my hair. When I see Dad exit one of the elevators, I jump to my feet and run to greet him. “Dad!” I wave and smile. “I got a call from the hospital, but my phone died before I could answer. Is it Mom? How is she?”

Dad puts a hand on my shoulder and leads me back to the lobby chairs. I sit back down, and he takes the chair next to me. He holds my hand tightly between his, and I wince. I start to get a sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach.

“Orwell, Mom is dead.”

I brake. I place my other hand on top of his and squeeze. I shut my eyes tight, and when I open them, my vision is watery with tears.

“Mom did great yesterday; she was almost at 100 percent O2. Then... Earlier today there was a COVID code. I passed Mom’s room, and that’s when I saw them. Her O2 stats were dropping rapidly, nurses were running to administer supplemental oxygen. One of the nurses in the hall held me back, but I wasn’t fighting to get inside the room. I wasn’t fighting...”

He starts to cry. I have never seen Dad cry before. It’s a scary sight.

I wail and sob. I slide out of the chair and crumple to the floor. Dad joins me, holding me tightly in his arms, and this time I don’t care that it hurt. I use the pain of this hug to mask the pain of having lost Mom. “I never got to tell her I loved her,” I said between sobs.

Dad whispers in my ear, “She knows, she knows.”

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The following weeks are a blur of tears, FaceTime calls with Dad, funeral arrangements, and condolence flowers from family. I am a husk of myself. I don’t even attempt to write. I can’t. I barely sleep and eat little. It’s only when Sage starts practicing again that I am forced off my bed.

“Why do you keep practicing when you know you’re bad at it?”

“Why do you try to write a book that will probably fail?” Sage claps back.

I'm stunned, "Well, because it's something I love and that's the only way to... get... better." Sage smiles at me as I realize my way out of my grief. *Write!* No matter what shows up on the screen just write.

I return to my room and open my laptop. *I have the name.*

*Alister turns the porch light on and opens the door to find his sister, Emma, alive and well.*