

Time, we find ourselves waiting for it... Time, we expect it to change everything... Time, it keeps coming, but we never realize... until we wake up one day... and time has run out... and there is nothing left.

All we know is twenty-four hours. Twenty-four hours, that's all the time we have to make a difference. Twenty-four hours, that's all we can really expect out of life, because before we realize it time has run out, our life runs out, and there is nothing left remaining. It ends like a wisp of smoke and a flash of hot lightning. It ends before it has begun. It just ends.

The car ride home was when everything melted away, the façade that everything was okay. It was when everything became real, there was no more pretending. It hit me like a sandstorm, engulfing me in a wave of disaster. I was alone.

Going home with the family was not an option. My insides burned with a white hot fire every time I glanced in their directions. It reminded me that everything I had been through was real. I was not in some kind of sick nightmare, I was actually living one. I got into a car with Colton instead.

"Rose," Aurora, Colton's sister, whispered. I never spoke, never acknowledged her presence.

"Rose, are you okay?" Aurora's voice was small, something completely unlike her normal self. It was an attempt at being kind. She was trying to make sure she didn't say anything that would upset me, but her question voiced a concern that was already pulsating through my brain. I didn't know how to answer her. How do you answer a question like that, a question with no real answer?

I was simply hopeless. Pandora had given up on me. She had let hope out of my box. Pandora released the only thing I had left. Hope.

No one ever told me that life was going to be that hard. No one ever sat me down and explained the real way things worked in the universe. No one ever explained to me that bad guys lived and good guys died. I was even brainwashed from watching those happily ever after movies. The ones that make you believe that faith, trust, and a little pixie dust are all the things you need in life. No, no one ever prepared me for the truth. How was I going to deal with it now?

“No, I’m not okay.” I murmured, glaring out at the trees.

“What can we do?” Lacy, one of my other friends, asked her voice drenched in pity.

“Nothing” I yelled, as I turned around to glare at her. Lacy seemed to shrink back, almost as if my gaze would burn her.

“Rose, she didn’t do anything wrong.” Her boyfriend, Gavin, murmured trying to make my glare disappear. I turned my lethal gaze onto him.

“No, she didn’t do anything wrong. You know who did? Nobody, nobody did anything wrong. But life is all wrong. How is that even possible? How can we all have been right, and everything turned out wrong?” I demanded of him, my sharp nails digging into the leather of Colton’s ’96 red Chevy.

“None of you seem to realize what you did wrong. I don’t know. From my point of view you guys are golden. You’re perfect. What did I do? I did nothing. I don’t deserve this. I did nothing wrong! But look what happened!” I screamed, holding back the tears my pride prevented me from shedding. They were the enemies, along with everyone else outside my window.

“Who did anything wrong, Gavin? I can name dozens of people who deserve this. Why did this happen to me? Why did this happen to my family? What did I do? How could I have stopped this?” I screamed spitting as I yelled. Aurora shrank into her boyfriend, Travis, trying to disappear from my rage. It was as if she were afraid of becoming infected by me, of catching my hatred. I didn’t blame her. I didn’t want the disease that ran through my veins.

That realization crumpled any walls that were left; the walls that had ones guarded my heart. I curled in on myself, bawling, for once not caring what anyone thought. My face was hot, my throat too tight to breathe. I hugged myself tightly, rocking back and forth. It was as if I was falling apart. It was only right, my life had already surrendered. Why not my limbs?

“Why?” I screamed at no one in particular, glaring out at the long stretch of road in front of my eyes. Shouldn’t somebody have given me an answer? Why did this happen if I didn’t do anything wrong?

I was broken, unfixable. My body shaking from the sobs that ripped through it. My heart was desperate for an answer, desperate for something, to know that I wasn’t dead yet. It felt like I was. I wished I was. Maybe if I were dead it would be okay.

I don't know when Colton pulled over the car. I only know that I tried to fight him as he pulled me into his arms.

"Shh, it's okay to cry." He smoothed my hair, whispering sweet things into my ear, trying to get my rapid heartbeat to calm.

My friend's hushed whispers never reached my ears. When darkness coated the earth, and my lungs were able to breathe again, Colton carried me like a rag doll to the cool leather of the backseat. Gavin took over the wheel.

They tried to come inside of my house, but I wouldn't let them. I didn't want anyone to see what was going to happen next. When I finally felt the pain, and I let the monster that had become my grief, out. They had already seen a disturbing preview. They didn't need to know what the feature film looked like, when the door finally closed, and I was alone.

I stumbled into the house, consumed by the darkness that covered it like a heavy blanket, suffocating any light that tried to shine. I tripped over myself, the weight of my body too much for my weak limbs to handle.

I knew no one else was home within a few minutes. If they had been, I would have been bombarded with kisses and hugs from tearful eyes.

The quiet that surrounded me was overwhelmingly loud. It was too much for one person to endure. It covered me up, gave me a headache. Worse yet, it made me think.

I crawled up the stairs on my hands and knees. My body was shaking, telling me it was about to give in, telling me it was giving up.

I fell around the hallway in a haze of tears and soft cries, tripping over the many toys that covered the wooden floor. His teddy bears, his toy trucks, and his little GI Joes, they were what his childhood should have represented.

His room sat just as before. His bed unmade, his dirty clothes and toys thrown across the floor where he had left them. His homemade rug worn out in places due to hours of playing, his *Toy Story* curtains were thrown open, letting in the night sky. His little Nemo nightlight was on. The one I had given him, the one that used to soothe my nightmares of the boogey man and unseen monsters that lived underneath my bed. It was the only light in a room chocked with darkness. Even the bright light of the stars seemed to have faded away.

I clutched my ears desperate to stifle the screams that rang through them. They consumed me, controlled me. It took me a while to figure out they were my screams, coming from my mouth. My body would not move it just stood there limply. I was frozen. Forever doomed to stare at the room of my dead baby brother, Ben, a life that had just begun.

Eventually, two hot arms snaked around my chest. Holding me tight, daring to take away my pain and protect me from the world outside. I no longer had the will to fight them, my body so tired it was if I were falling. They held me tight, the owner whispering things I could not comprehend. They soothed the screaming. They reminded me that I was the one that still had a heartbeat.

My mom, my sister, and I slept in Ben's room that night on his floor. We felt the cool woven rug on our faces. We smelled the damp, wonderful stink that only a little boy can have Ben's smell. I clutched the teddy bear, the one he once held onto at night, close to my heart. My mind dared to pretend that everything was still okay, that this was just a childhood sleepover.

The next morning, I woke up disoriented, confused about my whereabouts. I stumbled, half-blind, into the nearest bathroom. The cool water took away some of the stickiness that my tears had left. As I dried my face with hand towel my mother had laid out, the one with the embroidered pink flowers, I glared into the mirror. It was as if my heart stopped. It took me a minute to realize I was staring at myself, because in my grief I had disappeared. I was nonexistent; instead the face of a little boy I would forever love stared at me. I saw Ben's face, his button nose, his clear blue eyes, his light spray of freckles, and his curly blonde hair. I saw him, but it was only me.

I didn't feel like me anymore. I was to be forever haunted, and to forever haunt the ones lucky enough to not know the real world. I was a ghost, a ghost doomed to roam a world where babies died, where little brothers, innocent ones that deserve to live, never got the chance. Where murders and evil people walk around free to live an undeserved life and the good people die right before our eyes. What kind of justice was that?

It felt as though that monster inside of me had taken away some precious part that was once in my heart. Something I never knew existed until the moment it was gone. I suppose it was a little piece of innocence that would make the world okay for those that had not been robbed of a pure soul. Now that it too had died, what was I left with? How was I supposed to remain? What

was I supposed to do now that my life was empty? Now that my baby brother had his life stolen away by cancer?

No one ever tells you that life is evil. No one ever explains that it hurts. They just expect you to know that, to learn that on your own. They expect you to go through life and try to make it out with as few scars as possible. What about the ones not lucky enough to live long enough to know what scars are?

Ben never got to see the happy that life could bring. He never got the butterflies that a crush could bring. He never got the love of friends. The real ones, the ones that stick around and let you bully them because they know your hurting too much to handle it alone. He never got to see the good part. He just got to experience the pain. He just got to be the little boy that never lived.

Everyone has a timer. A timer set to the exact amount of time they have to live. Ben's ran out too soon, and mine was still going. I wasn't sure if I wanted it too. I wasn't sure...