

Gone

It's my fault they left, Mom and Brian. I still feel the emptiness, the hole inside me that will never be replaced by anyone. I remember clearly what happened, the way I saw them drive away. I didn't know that it would be for good, though. I see it clearly, the lights the only thing on the car I could still see as they drove over the hill just a little up the street from us. And then-

"Laney! Listen to me!" Dad yelled, his green eyes identical to mine flashing with anger. I could tell by the way he was frowning and by the way his face was turning bright red that he was mad. Really mad. "Did you hear a word I just said?" He yelled, looking ready to pull his hair out of his head.

"No," I snapped, shoving my feet into my ratty green flip flops while grabbing a thin blue jacket which was covered in random paint splatters. "And I don't want to! I don't care!" I knew I was being completely unreasonable, but still. I was just as angry as he was, so why couldn't he just understand that I wasn't in a good mood? Or that I just wanted to be alone? I ran out the door, his voice following me to the sidewalk, where I continued running.

"LANEY! Get back in here!" he screamed, but I refused to listen. I couldn't listen. I just couldn't.

"No!" I screamed, leaving our fight behind me.

I slowed to a walk after about five minutes of intense running, my heart pounding. I reached into my pocket, searching for the twenty dollar bill I knew was there, grabbing it between my fingers. I glanced at the gray overcast sky, hoping I'd be able to make it to the bus station before it started to rain. I didn't really want to get soaked. That would just make my miserable day even worse. Ten minutes later I walked down the steps to the old gray dilapidated structure, otherwise known as the Grendland bus station. I paid and waiting for my version of a golden ticket, looking around at the dirty building I was in. An obviously bored woman handed me my ticket through the window, attempting to stifle a yawn. I glanced in my hand, my eyes feasting upon the small slip of paper that was my version of a golden ticket. A way for me to get home.

I stepped onto the bus and sat down, smashed between the window and a woman who looked like she was about to fall asleep. I uncomfortably shrugged out of my jacket, balling it up and shoving it between the woman and me. I sighed, knowing I'd be on the bus for a little over

an hour, which would be horrible in this oppressive summer heat. We started moving, and I rested my head against the cool glass window, thinking about the last time I'd seen Mom and Brian. We'd been fighting over something, but I don't remember what it was. They'd left for Brian's soccer practice, yelling about how they were going to be late. Little did any of us know that they wouldn't be coming back. I wiped my eyes and took a deep breath, shoving those thoughts away, the ones of Mom and Brian. Instead I tried to think of the book I was currently reading, *Because of Winn-Dixie*. I'd been reading it this morning, and I was at the part where Opal couldn't find Winn-Dixie. Her dad had wanted to give up looking for Winn-Dixie. And they'd gotten into a fight. "Opal," the preacher said in a real soft voice, "it's time to give up."

"You always give up!" I shouted. "You're always pulling your head inside your stupid old turtle shell. I bet you didn't even go out looking for my mama when she left I bet you just let her run off, too." I smiled a little, wishing that my biggest problem in life was my dog being lost. That'd be so much easier for me to deal with.

The woman next to me shifted and her head fell on my shoulder. I cringed while trying to push her over into her own seat, my jacket barrier failing. She shifted again, and I sighed with relief as my personal bubble was restored, returning to my thoughts. Mom and Brian had left in such a rush that I hadn't gotten the chance to say goodbye. Now it was too late. I sighed. I knew that wasn't going to happen, that my problems were real, not just ones from a book. My mom and brother were actually gone. They weren't coming back. I sighed again as the rain started hitting the window, softly at first, and then harder. The air became even hotter and stickier, and I began sweating while simultaneously praying that the bus ride would be over soon. I didn't know how long I would be able to sit in this uncomfortable seat, smashed between a sleeping lady and a window.

I gulped in the fresh air as I stepped off the bus, my foot landing in a puddle of freezing cold rainwater. It was still hot, but less oppressively so than the air on the bus had been, and the cold rain felt amazing on my hot skin. Every else who got off the bus ran for cover from the rain, but I slowly walked away, relishing in the cool rain. It's not like I actually had anywhere to go, or anyone who was waiting for me. I was all alone. That thought struck me with force, and I squeezed my eyes shut, trying not to cry. I hadn't cried in months, not since Mom and Brian left, and I intended not to. I was stronger than that. I frowned as I stepped in another freezing puddle,

the cold water splashing onto my feet, which weren't being kept dry by my flip flops. I should've worn different shoes. Oh well. It was too late for that now.

Within a few minutes of being outside I was soaked to the skin, my clothes doing little to protecting me from the ice-cold rain. I didn't have anywhere to go, so I couldn't change out of my wet clothes, but I didn't really care. My toes became numb, and my fingers were slowly accepting the same fate as I aimlessly walked around my old town, wishing that Mom and Brian had never left, and that Dad hadn't moved the two of us after they did. A tear leaked out of my eyes as I tried to remember what'd happened the last time I'd seen my mom and brother. I think I'd been yelling about something stupid, like... I don't know. A few more tears leaked out of my eyes as I thought about that. We'd been fighting about something so stupid that I couldn't even remember what it was. It obviously hadn't been important. Now they were both gone, and it was entirely my fault. I began openly sobbing, the guilt hitting me like a tsunami. I was responsible for two of my family members... leaving. Me. My own family. I sat down on a bench, placing my head in my hands, still crying profusely, my thoughts going a mile a minute. Why did they have to leave? It was my fault. How was I supposed to get through the rest of my life with them gone? Why, why, why? My hands trembled as my I struggled to pull myself together, knowing that someone was bound to notice I was out here sooner or later, and that would lead to them calling my dad, which would lead to even more chaos right now. I sighed, wiping my eyes. I had to move, because that's just how people in Millwood were. Everyone in this town knew who I was, and what had happened with my mom and brother. Basically, I'd just get in huge trouble, so I stood up and walked away from the bench, still thinking about my Mom and Brian. This was the first time since they'd left that I'd let myself think this much about them. Usually whenever thoughts of them came into my head, I'd busy myself with other tasks or thoughts, knowing I'd think about how it was my fault they'd left. I knew that I would've done exactly what I was doing right now. Blame myself and wish desperately that they would come back, which I knew wasn't going to happen. I knew though that right now I couldn't do that. I needed to think about them, or else I'd forget them. That scared me, and my mind became swamped with thoughts of them, as I was desperately trying to remember the color of my mom's eyes, Brian's laugh and other little things that I realized with fear were slowly slipping from my memory. Tears started streaming down my face again as I slowly realized that pushing thoughts of my mom and brother had been a mistake, because now that I was trying to remember things about them, I couldn't. I

clenched my fists, now furious at myself for being so stupid. Not only was it my fault that they left, but now I couldn't even remember small details about them. I should've known this would happen. I hadn't tried to think about them, really think about them, for so long. Realizing I couldn't remember two of my own family members was like a blow to the face. What kind of daughter and sister was I? I'd been responsible for my mom and brother leaving, and now I couldn't even remember them. If they knew, they'd probably hate me. Why wouldn't they? I hated myself for being so stupid as to push them out of my thoughts for these past months.

The rain began to slow slightly to a light shower as I walked towards the outer part of Millwood, towards my house. I didn't really want to go back there, but I was hoping that if I saw the place where I'd last seen Mom and Brian that maybe, just maybe, I'd remember something else about them, even if it was just something as small as the sound of my Mom's laugh, or the way Brian's voice sounded when he was angry or happy. I turned down my old street, coming to a stop in front of the small brick house that I used to call home. There were a few lights on inside, and I could pick out the sound of laughter coming out of the kitchen window. This made me frown. It had been a while since I'd heard laughter coming from a place that I'd lived in. My new house was almost always silent. My dad and I hadn't laughed since mom and Brian left. I turned and walked quickly away from my house, tears clouding my vision again. I couldn't be by my old house right now. Maybe some other time, but not right now. Instead I began to head in the other direction, my feet taking me away from the place I used to call home.

I gasped when I realized where I was, freezing in front of the Millwood Cemetery. I reluctantly stepped through the gate, wishing I had flowers or something to leave for my family members. I trudged to the back corner of the cemetery, my heart pounding with expectation as I approached the Hunter's section, my family's section, where various family members of mine were buried. Every family in Millwood had their own section of the cemetery where their family could call theirs, because it was a small town, and that's just how things went here. I think my dad and I were like, the first family to ever leave Millwood. Nobody ever moved out, but occasionally people would move in, but even then it was most likely because they had relatives in Millwood. There wasn't really any reason to come to this tiny town that wasn't even on a single map of Ohio. There wasn't anything special about it, other than the fact that everyone knew everything there was to know about all the other inmates of this town. That's probably why

dad packed us up and moved the two of us to Greenland. Because too many people knew our story, how Mom and Brian left.

“Hey Gram,” I whispered, kneeling down in front of my grandmother’s grave. “I’m sorry that I haven’t been in a while. I guess you probably know about Mom and Brian. I’m really sorry, I am.” I wiped my eyes, the cold that had made its way to my bones slowly become less important as I focused on my family members that were around me. They were what was important, not the fact that I could barely feel any of my limbs. “I love you.” I whispered, gently brushing my fingers along my Gram’s headstone.

“Grandpa James, I really miss you. I wish you were here, because I know you’d tell me a joke or something to make me think about something else. Anything else. I hope you’re happy in Heaven. I know you’re there. A nice guy like you wouldn’t go anywhere else.” I laughed quietly, fidgeting with the zipper on my jacket, knowing where I was slowly heading. I moved onto my Uncle, then my Great Grandpa George and so on. I talked to all of my relatives, slowly moving from the older graves to the more recent ones, the dread in my head and heart increasing exponentially every time I slowly inched towards the last two graves. I tried to stall myself as I talked to my dead relatives, knowing exactly who the last graves belonged to, even without looking at them.

“I wish you could see Mrs. Jay’s flowers,” I said to my Aunt Jennifer, a small smile playing at the corners of my mouth. “she’s trying to outdo the roses you entered every year in the county fair.” I laughed. “It’s not working.” I whispered. Yours were always better. I don’t know who she thinks she’s kidding, thinking that she can outgrow yours.” I said, finishing with another ‘I love you’. Then I glanced at the next two graves, my heart pounding as I realized who they belonged to, though in my heart I had known all along exactly whose graves these were going to be. “In loving memory of Tanya Hunter. Wife, daughter and mother.” I whispered, tears flowing freely down my face now. I glanced at the headstone next to my mother’s, reading it. “In loving memory of Brian Hunter. Brother and son.” I was shaking at this point, and I’d tuned out everything around me. All I could see was the two headstones that represented all the sadness and grief in my life now. “I’m so sorry. I’m so sorry.” I whispered, my shoulders slumping as if the weight of the world was on them. “It’s my fault, Mom. *My* fault, Brian.” I whispered, my voice wavering. “I’m so sorry.”