And we run

Laura Ann Pierson
University at Albany, State University of New York, lpierson@albany.edu

The University at Albany community has made this article openly available. Please share how this access benefits you.

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarsarchive.library.albany.edu/legacy-td

Part of the Creative Writing Commons

Recommended Citation
https://scholarsarchive.library.albany.edu/legacy-td/2555

This Master's Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the The Graduate School at Scholars Archive. It has been accepted for inclusion in Legacy Theses & Dissertations (2009 - 2024) by an authorized administrator of Scholars Archive. Please see Terms of Use. For more information, please contact scholarsarchive@albany.edu.
And We Run

by

Laura A Pierson

A Thesis
Submitted to the University at Albany, State University of New York
In Partial Fulfillment of
the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts

College of Arts and Sciences
Department of English
May 2020
ABSTRACT

“And We Run” is a Young Adult novella that explores themes of grief, obsession, teenage suicidality, and loss. It follows a teenager named Seth, who has recently lost his twin brother, Colin, in a car accident. Seth refuses to believe his brother is dead, and he becomes obsessed with retracing his brother’s life through the journal Colin left behind. As Seth becomes more and more enthralled with trying to understand Colin, he also becomes fixated on his brother’s past relationship with a girl named Candice. Seth pursues a friendship with Candice, and the two of them begin to chase some sort of emotional closure for Colin’s death. In the novella’s afterward, I analyze how Young Adult fiction has portrayed adolescent mental health issues and suicidality, focusing especially on Looking for Alaska by John Green and Thirteen Reasons Why by Jay Asher. I also dissect some of the narrative and characterization choices I made in “And We Run” in the context of Young Adult conventions.
To Mom and Dad. Thank you.
And We Run

A month after your accident, Mom and Dad had a funeral. Or a memorial service, I guess, because there wasn’t a body.

The church was claustrophobic with clumsy people saying too many right things. I didn’t know Mom and Dad knew so many people, and I wondered how many of them had actually known you, or if you were only an idea to them: Peter and Kim’s quiet kid, one of the twins, a Goddamn tragedy.

That was the first time I talked to Candice. She was exactly like you described her. I’d seen her around at school before, I guess, but not since your accident. And before that I’d honestly never noticed her.

Candice came up to me, Mom, and Dad in-between the sorry for your losses and in a better place now’s. Her eyes and face were scrubbed red from crying.

“I’m really sorry about Colin, Mr. and Mrs. Reynolds,” Candice said in a voice barely above a whisper. Everything about her was barely above a whisper: her thin hair, narrow frame, and transparent eyelashes beaded with tears. She wore a gray dress with blue flowers. A lot of the kids from school weren’t wearing black. It was a tiny school, so most of the students knew you. Or at least knew me and knew you were my brother.

“And, Seth –” she looked at me, met my eyes as if she was pleading for something. It was a shock to hear my name. Not like I was surprised she knew it – but I guess I was surprised she’d addressed me directly. Her voice, my name, dug me into the ground, refused to let me float away.

“I’m really sorry,” she told me.
“Thank you so much,” said Mom, blinking, holding out a hand. Dad rumbled something in a husky voice, eyes too bright behind his glasses.

Candice clutched Mom’s outstretched hand, and her desperate eyes turned from me to her. I thought she must have been looking for pieces of you in our faces: Mom’s hair, Dad’s nose, our eyes.

She hovered. Her lips were smudged with pink lipstick. She bobbed on the toes of her black ballet flats.

“How did you know Colin?”

For a moment Candice teetered with the realization that you had never mentioned her; it was like Mom had slapped her. “From school,” she breathed. “We were – friends from school.”

“Thank you so much for coming,” said Mom, letting go of Candice’s hand.

Candice nodded quickly and left, trying to wipe her eyes so we wouldn’t notice, maybe afraid her grief was too gaudy in the face of our silence: Mom, Dad, and I, statues at the front of the sanctuary. Relics like the monstrous organ climbing the wall behind us. Mom and Dad’s hands dangled at their sides, not touching.

I watched Candice flee through the doors to the lobby, where Mom and Dad had ordered a lunch from that Italian place they always went to when Dad had to take a client out for dinner.

There was still a line of people waiting to apologize.

Never apologize, Dad told you and me so many times, even if you think it was your fault. He was a traffic court lawyer, so he would know.
Even though I couldn’t imagine eating anything, I pulled away from Mom and Dad and muttered, “Gonna get food.” Mom would probably be angry later that I left them to deal with all those strangers by themselves, but I didn’t care.

I followed Candice into the lobby. It was full of more people. I saw Candice meet a woman by the doors, maybe her mother, who handed her a coat and led her toward the parking lot. I didn’t know what I wanted to say to her, or why it suddenly seemed so important, but I swallowed back the impulse to shout at her to hold up.

Instead I rushed forward, conscious of how alarming it would look if I started to run. The door shut behind Candice and her mother, but I’d still be able to catch them before they got into their car.

“Seth!” Arms caught me around the middle, and I immediately recognized Amy as she buried her head in my chest. A gang of my friends and teammates closed around me, eyebrows furrowed, words of comfort on their lips, some clutching paper plates with lasagna and fluorescent-orange-frosted cupcakes.

*Orange was his favorite color,* Mom told the caterer, lips trembling, grief naked and brutal in front of this stranger, and dabbed at her eyes with a gray tissue. Orange hadn’t been your favorite color since you were maybe seven years-old. I don’t remember what your favorite color was now, or if you even had one.

“Hey, man, we’re really sorry, man,” said Brandon.

“Yeah, sucks, Seth. Really sucks,” said Noah.

“I’m so sorry. I’m so sorry,” Amy said into my shirt.
I grabbed Amy’s wrists and tried to pry her off. She lifted her face and I saw mascara tracks on her cheeks.

“Sorry, I have to –” I craned my neck to see around them. My tie felt like it was strangling me. I couldn’t see Candice and her mother anymore behind the rows of cars in the parking lot. “See someone,” I finished and pushed through the circle.

I shoved the door open and the bitter February wind knifed through me before I’d taken more than a few steps. A Honda CR-V pulled out of the parking lot and onto the road. I caught a glimpse of Candice in the passenger seat, but her face was in her hands, so she didn’t see me. I stood and watched her drive away. The tearstains Amy had left on my shirt cooled against my chest in the frigid air.

***

I was watching the news when the cops came to tell us you were gone. Mom was making chicken stew. As usual, Dad was still at work.

A car barreled off Oil Mill Road into the half-frozen Niantic river. Emergency vehicle lights flashed and snow flurried behind the smile of the blond newscaster who explained no bodies were recovered yet, a process complicated by inclement weather.

I answered the door when the cops rang the bell, and I didn’t know to connect the accident on the news with the two officers on the front porch and the words inform next of kin.

“Son.” An officer nodded gravely. “Your parents home?”

Mom came around the corner, cuffing her wet hands on her jeans. I watched her face cloud with fear – cheeks blanched, eyes misty – when she saw the officers standing in the doorway; that was how I knew something was wrong.
My stomach clenched like someone had threatened to punch me in the gut but pulled back at the last second, and it stayed clenched, something balled up inside of me that wouldn’t let go.

“Ma’am,” said the second officer, voice soft. Resigned. “May we come in?”

They told us about your accident, regurgitated what we’d heard on the news. The license plate was registered under your name. You told us you were going to the library to study. It wasn’t out of the ordinary. You didn’t tell us when you’d be back. Mom assumed it’d be before dinner.

Mom called Dad. There was an accident. Colin. Oh, Peter, our baby.

They couldn’t pull the car out of the river until it stopped snowing. Your body was ejected from the driver’s seat, must have come through the shattered windshield, probably drifted down the river. Emergency crews were still searching. Witnesses described how a four-person sedan drove off the side of the road, tumbled down the 20-foot embankment, and disappeared within minutes below the water. Maybe the wheels skidded on black ice. Maybe it was deliberate.

They were sorry, the cops said, but they had to ask, had you been depressed, had you given Mom any indication, had she found any notes.

“I don’t understand,” said Mom.

“Witnesses described –”

“But you haven’t found the – but you haven’t found Colin yet.”

“Do you have any reason to believe someone else was driving Colin’s car?”

“We’re sorry,” the other cops said, “It’s protocol to make an investigation in these kinds of cases.”
“What kinds of cases?” Mom’s voice squeaked. She was shaking all over. She sank onto the couch and kneaded her hands together. Maybe she was going to start praying. “He wouldn’t have. Colin wouldn’t have.”

One of the officers perched next to Mom and I could tell he wasn’t sure if he should put his hand on her back. He asked if there was anyone he could call.

The television was still on; the news moved to local sports, and I killed the power. Then I remembered the stew, so I left to turn off the burner. The other cop followed me into the kitchen. I wondered if I was supposed to offer him a glass of water or something.

“Wanna head back in and sit with your mom until your dad gets home?” the officer asked.

“Sure,” I said, but I braced my back against the counter.

Did he expect me to break down? How did other people respond in situations like this? I felt cold. Stiff. I thought about you plunging headfirst into the icy water. My stomach was still braced for something, waiting for a blow, but I didn’t think I was going to cry.

“He was your brother, huh? Older or younger?” He didn’t wait for an answer. “He ever tell you anything that made you worry he was going to hurt himself?”

Younger. By 23 minutes. The best 23 minutes of my life. I don’t remember how many times I used that stupid line.

“No one’s in trouble,” the cop continued. “Don’t worry. We’re just trying to figure out what happened to Colin.”

People didn’t believe us when we said we were twins. You got Mom’s slight build and curls and Dad’s bad eyesight. I got Dad’s broad shoulders and height. And it’s not like we were
alike in any other ways. We were close as kids, I guess. But lately I was always busy with basketball and you were always busy with whatever you did. Your music, I guess. And reading.

The cop was staring at me. Maybe I was concerning him. I don’t know.

The cop stopped staring at me when Dad barged through the door, coat half-on and eyeglasses immediately fogging from the swift temperature change.

“Kim,” said Dad, and Mom shot off the couch into Dad’s arms.

The cop left the kitchen and told Dad they had reason to believe you’d killed yourself, and asked for consent to search your room. Dad started yelling about search warrants and how they couldn’t touch a thing in your room because suicide wasn’t a crime and they didn’t have probable cause and they hadn’t found your body yet. At which point Mom was begging Dad to stop and the other officer came in to try to diffuse the situation.

I thought it was all bullshit.

They hadn’t found the body yet because you weren’t dead.

I would know if you were dead. We’d missed out on the usual twin-telepathy thing people talk about, the secret languages and intuition and shit, but I was certain that I would know if you were dead.

That was when Dad started to cry. Mom clung to him like she was drowning. I thought about how that was the first time I’d seen them hold each other for a while. Years maybe.

My eyes stung. The mass in my stomach twisted tighter. I thought maybe I was going to throw up, so I left. No one noticed me go.

***
It’s not like you wrote *Dear Diary* at the top of the page, or anything, but that’s what it was, the notebook I found in your room. I figured that out as soon as I opened the notebook and started flipping through it.

I don’t know why I did that. That shit was personal. I knew that. I knew you’d have hated the idea of me pawing around in your stuff. But the first place I went after I left the cops with Mom and Dad was upstairs to your room.

I hadn’t been in your room in a while. Not like how I used to spend hours in there, playing with Hot Wheels on that green rug with the roads printed on it, or loading Nerf guns, or flipping through Star Wars coloring books.

There were a bunch of books on the shelf against one wall. And there was a deflated soccer ball in the corner, size three from when we played in elementary school. You still had your old digital clock on your nightstand, covered in Pokémon stickers. Your backpack was open on the floor by your bed. Zipper pouch gaping, lolling like a tongue. Pens and crumpled loose-leaf paper. I wondered why you hadn’t brought your backpack to the library.

You had all these posters on the walls of bands I didn’t recognize: Kodaline, Young the Giant, Hippo Campus, Nothing But Thieves.

I couldn’t even remember the last time I talked to you.

Had we said anything that morning? I don’t think so. I was always up before you were. I think I was out of the house before you’d finished breakfast. Maybe last night. I think I said something to you last night, after I got home from practice and we were both in the kitchen. But I can’t remember what I said.
I stood there in the middle of your room, and I tried to think. Because what would the cops look for? Would Dad let them come up?

I knew enough about my room that I knew you wouldn’t want cops going through all your stuff. So, I looked for weed in your desk and for lube or condoms and stuff even though I didn’t know –

I didn’t even know if you were dating anyone or if you were still a virgin. We didn’t talk about stuff like that.

But I didn’t find anything. Zero latex or drugs. You were clean. I hoped to hell the cops wouldn’t want to go through your laptop. It was sitting right there on your desk.

And it was weird. It was definitely weird that you hadn’t brought it with you if you were planning on going to the library to study. No laptop. No backpack. But that thought made the ball in my stomach pull tighter, so I figured you must have forgotten it, right? You were planning on using the library’s computers.

I found the notebook – red, spiral bound, the corners curled and worn – in the top drawer of your dresser. Under your socks and boxers and stuff, so I figured it was important. I don’t really know why I took it.

Then I went to my room across the hall. I couldn’t hear Dad yelling at the cops anymore. I figured things had calmed down.

So, your diary or your journal or whatever it was – it didn’t start out with any girly Dear Diary shit.

This I will always have, you’d written at the top of the first page, like you were trying to be profound, or something.
I am so tired, you wrote.

Time does not stop for you.

How long? I wondered. The accident was on the six o’clock news. It was after seven, now. You’d been gone for two, two and a half hours. How far could you get on foot in two and a half hours? Had you managed to snag a ride right away?

My hands were shaking. I’m sorry; I think I ripped one or two of the pages in your book.

Because it’s not like you’re even dead. You’d pulled off one of the greatest hoaxes of the 21st century: faked your own death by sending your car headlong into an icy river. And now you were hitchhiking cross-country toward a better life. Someday, when we were in our mid-forties, I’d bump into you at some truck stop in the Godforsaken middle of nowhere; we’d exchange curt nods and go about our business without another word.

I heard the front door close from the floor below. I figured that meant the cops were gone. It was safe to go back downstairs, again. I stuffed the notebook under my bed and figured I’d look through it later that night.

Mom and Dad started calling a bunch of people, and I felt like maybe I should have called people, too. You know, my friends and – maybe your friends.

I felt this flash of panic, electricity sizzling down my spine, when I realized I didn’t really know who you hung out with. I’d seen you at lunch, maybe, sitting with a few people, but you didn’t come with me to parties. You didn’t talk about your friends.

I didn’t really want to call people, anyway. The last person I’d talked to was that cop, and my throat felt weird. Dry. But I stayed downstairs while Mom and Dad were busy. I did stuff around the house where they could see me.
Mom kept wanting to hug me and Dad clapped me on the shoulder and told me it was going to be okay.

I put the stew in the fridge because no one was going to eat dinner. I wasn’t hungry. There was that ball – a rubber band ball, I decided – wrapped up inside my intestines. Stretched so tight, I thought it might snap at any minute. I kept having to take big gulps of air when no one was watching to try to calm down the cramping in my stomach.

I don’t think Mom and Dad went to bed that night. Around midnight, I went back upstairs. I thought about a lot of stupid things. Like if I had to go to school tomorrow or if I could still play in the game on Thursday. Really stupid things.

I’m sorry.

I couldn’t sleep. I tried looking at my phone. I had a couple texts from Amy, silly stuff like how’s your night. Miss you baby. What are you doing. But I didn’t want to text her back, and I felt bad ignoring her, so I put my phone down and stared at the ceiling for a while.

You know when you can’t sleep, and you stare at this dark, blank slate of ceiling over your head? Everything starts swirling a little. Pulses like the whole world’s swelling with your heartbeat.

And I thought about how you might have done it – duct tape around the gas pedal? But I suppose the cops would have found evidence of that. So maybe you climbed out of the car after the car was already in the water.

I picked up my phone again.

*how to escape from a submerged car* I Googled.

*how long can you survive in frozen water* I Googled.
what does it feel like to drown

can you declare someone legally dead if there's no body

death in absentia

how to tell if a car crash was a suicide

how to commit suicide without anyone knowing

I got a bunch of hotlines after that one. I put my phone away, again. My head hurt from staring at the bright screen in the dark. Then I remembered your notebook. I rolled onto my stomach and stuck my arm under my bed where I’d stowed it next to my basketball shoes and the shoebox of all that crap I kept from when I was a kid: dollar store little green soldiers, old track and field ribbons, pictures, and birthday cards, and shit like that.

Then I turned my light back on. I could hear the low grumble of the TV from downstairs. A dripping faucet in the bathroom. The chug of the dishwasher. And I wondered what Mom was thinking while loading the dishes, if she was just doing it by rote, or maybe on purpose in order to inject some kind of normalcy back into the night. Or maybe she wanted to clean something. Set something right.

I flipped through a few pages of your notebook. There were sketches in there. Tiny, cramped drawings of weird, skeletal spider-things in the page margins, and full-page sketches of flying insects with bugged-out eyes, all kaleidoscope, geometric patterns, and where’d you keep your weed? Because those things were hella trippy.

And then you started writing about this girl.
Her breasts puddled on her chest, pale and smooth. God, she was beautiful. Soft and calm. I didn’t know how to touch her, but she made this breathy gasp when I traced the outline of her nipple –

Holy shit, man. You kept writing about this girl. I flipped backwards and forwards, scanned words here and there, but nothing more about her nipples, or anything, just dopey stuff about the dimples in her cheeks when she smiled.

Her eyelashes are so pale, it’s like they’re not really there. She’s almost transparent. She’s brittle. I worry I could hold her too tight and she’d snap.

I didn’t find her name until a few passes through, scrawled into a corner: an address, and at the top was Candice Lowry.

The name sounded sort of familiar. Like every name sounded sort of familiar from rollcall at our small Catholic school. I think maybe I had a chemistry class with her.

So, she was your girlfriend. She was obviously your girlfriend, right? If you were writing about her tits, and stuff. Right?

Why hadn’t you ever said anything about her? Mom and Dad were constantly teasing us about shit like that. You could have had her over to dinner like I’d had Amy that one time. Or, like, told us when you were going on a date with her.

And, damn, but she wouldn’t know yet, would she? There was no way she knew yet that you were – that’d you

You know. Disappeared.

It’s not like I’m in denial.
Should I call her? I didn’t have her number. I had no way of getting her number. And I couldn’t –

I just couldn’t.

I heard Mom’s footsteps on the stairs, so I turned off my light. I didn’t want her coming in and asking if I was okay. She’d probably start crying again. Here’s the thing about Mom crying, it always feels indecent. Like I’m walking in on something private. She looks so wrecked and vulnerable. Splayed out like that. A crucifixion or some shit.

I couldn’t see the notebook in the dark.

Then it was back to staring at the ceiling.


***

I didn’t go to school the next day. Turns out the principal sent out an email to the student body telling everyone about your accident. That you were dead, or whatever. Such bullshit, man.

I couldn’t help but think about Candice. But I didn’t have her number. I swear, I’d have called her if I had her number.

So, I didn’t go into school. And I got a ton of texts and calls from Amy, Brandon, Noah, some of the other guys. Amy asked if she could come over, if I needed anything, told me she loved me. I figured I would have to reply to her eventually, but for now your accident was a damn good excuse to, I don’t know, ignore things for a little while.

Sorry, man. That’s pretty gross of me to say. I know. I’m sorry.

But you know that me and Amy – I mean, maybe you knew. I never really talked to you about it. But you know what relationships in high school are like, right? They don’t last. Amy was
hot. She was even funny. And she – you know. Like she was nice girl. Someone I could bring home to Mom and Dad. But it wasn’t like it was serious. We’d probably get through Junior prom together. But summer? Amy wasn’t a summer kind of relationship. Definitely not a senior year relationship. Because everyone knows you shouldn’t bother with a girlfriend in senior year. Not when you’re going to leave for college at the end of it all.

Anyway, Amy was a nice girl. I just didn’t want to have to deal with her, right then.

Did you think Candice was a summer kind of girl? Or were you guys one of *those* couples? The kind that thought they were going to make it?

Guess not.

So, I missed that next day of school. Actually, I missed all that week. And the game. Which, whatever. We won anyway. And coach was cool. Sent me an email telling me to take all the time I needed, that the team had my back. Cool.

But I had to go back on Monday. Everyone was nice, all smiles, clapping me on the shoulder, telling me how sorry they were. You know the drill.

If felt a little bit like being high. There was something wrong with the hallways. They were – too bright? Too big, maybe. And there was this thing with my hands. I kept looking at my hands while I was sitting at my desk. My fingers were so narrow and long. And my fingernails were all short and stubby because you know how Mom always yelled at me to stop chewing them. And veins on the back of my fists. I could see the veins move when I curled and flexed my fingers.

It was like my hands didn’t even belong to me. I don’t know. It felt weird. I touched my thumb to the tip of each finger, feeling the ridges of my fingerprints, and just kept thinking *this is me. This is real.*
And my name is Seth Reynolds. My twin brother is Colin and everyone thinks he’s dead. Everyone thinks you’re dead. That’s crazy. That’s, like, really damn crazy.

***

I looked for Candice at school. I really did. I promise. I wanted to – I don’t know. I wanted to tell her something. I wondered if she knew about all that stuff you’d written about her in your notebook. I wondered if I was supposed to show her or something. Maybe give it to her.

It’s weird – I’m going to tell you straight off that it’s weird that you wrote about that stuff. Like that’s porn, man. You wrote porn about your girlfriend. And, yeah, it’s hot. But what the hell was I supposed to do with that?

I couldn’t find Candice anywhere, so I figured she’d taken time off school, too. And she took off more time than I did. Three whole weeks. That’s why the first time I talked to Candice was at your memorial service. I already told you about that.

I saw her a couple days after the service, too. She was finally back in school.

She was alone in the library. I tried to talk to her earlier at lunch, but Amy was holding my hand. Wouldn’t even let me eat normally. Her nails left crescent moon shapes on the back of my fist. I think Amy was afraid I was going to break up with her. I guess I’d been a little distant lately.

But I found Candice later in the library. She had a book spread open on the table in front of her. The school librarian pegged me with this sympathetic look as I passed her. They were bruising – those kinds of looks. All dewy-eyed, pursed lips.

I hooked a chair with my ankle and dropped next to Candice before she even realized I was there. She looked up from her book and her lips dropped into a small, shocked O of surprise.

Her lips are soft. Thin. Warm. Her chapstick tastes like vanilla.
That’s what you wrote about her lips. I wondered if Candice had chapstick on now.

“Oh, hi,” she said, and she looked nervous. She isn’t – I mean, she’s pretty, I guess. She was pretty at the memorial service in her dress with her hair done nicely. But she isn’t hot. At least not in the library, wearing the same white button-down and pleated green skirt all the girls had to wear. She looked all washed out and tired.

“Mind if I sit here?” I said. And that’s the difference between you and me. I’m good at making friends. I’m like up front with people, you know? What you see is what you get? I smile and people smile back. You didn’t even talk to people unless they talked to you first.

“Yeah, okay, sure.” She scooted her chair over until it clattered with the chair next to it. Like she didn’t want to sit too close to me.

Was grief contagious? People treat you differently when you’re grieving. They skirt around the edges. They’re way too aware of how they talk to you and how they touch you. Probes coming out of their every pore, gauging how they should act. Because I was this different species with a disappeared brother.

Candice closed her book on two of her fingers to mark her page.

“What are you reading?” I asked.

“It’s Never Let Me Go,” she said. She looked at the title before she answered. Kept looking at it. “I’m sorry about your brother.”

“That for school?” I asked.

“Yeah.”

“And I’m sorry, too,” I said, “About it. You know.”
“Oh.” Her face flushed. Pink across her nose and cheeks. Barely-there freckles. Okay. She was cute when she blushed. I could see the appeal. She was small, though. Flighty. Birdlike. I wondered if she was one of those girls who don’t eat.

“Thank you,” she said. Like she was genuinely touched. I wondered if I was the first person to tell her sorry about you. “We met in English,” she explained. And jiggled *Never Let Me Go* on the table. It made sense, why I didn’t recognize the book from class; you were in advanced placement English. God, such a nerd.

“Is it good?” I asked. I don’t care about books. I’m okay with math and science, I guess. I don’t get the point of books. Just a bunch of dumb words. And teachers are always asking you to analyze what they mean. Character motivation. Sometimes people do dumb shit. Just drive off the Goddamn road into the water, you know?

It’s not that I’m angry about it. I’m not.

But you could have at least dropped a hint about where you were going. Or that you were going, period.

“It’s okay, yeah,” she said.

And then she hesitated. It was the kind of hesitation Amy gave me when she was on the brink of spilling her whole life story. Like the sob story about how she was bullied in first grade, which is bullshit because Amy’s not the kind of girl who was bullied, not even in first grade.

“It’s about atonement, you know? And about learning to accept death,” Candice settled on.

“Oh, cool,” I nodded. Like I knew what she was talking about. I do that all the time – you always complained how I do that all the time. It makes people feel like they’re inferior, you said. I just don’t like being out of the loop.
“You guys are –” she was still red-faced, still staring at the cover of her book. Now she was tracing the letters with her hand, the one not holding her place. “Were twins, right?”

“Yeah,” I said. “How long were you guys...ah, friends?” I didn’t want her to know about the sex thing. I didn’t want her to know I’d been reading about her naked body in your notebook.

“I started here this September. We met in English,” she repeated herself. Then she sniffed. Shit. I didn’t want to make her cry. “Sorry,” she said again. Like a Goddamn skipping record. It’s so stupid how people keep apologizing. They didn’t make you leave. They didn’t drop a rock on the gas pedal and send your car into the river.

“I need to head out,” she said. She pulled her fingers out of the book, losing her spot. She stood up from the table. She grabbed her backpack from under the chair and stuffed her book into it. She did all this without looking at me.

I could see her eyes were foggy with tears. Rimmed with red. And I really didn’t mean to make her cry.

“I wanted to talk to you at the memorial service,” I blurted out.

She paused. “Yeah?” she said. “Sorry. For leaving early, I mean.”

“That’s okay,” I stood up. I didn’t like the idea of her standing above me while we talked. But then I wished I hadn’t stood up because I was so much taller than her. Like at least a foot. I remembered what you wrote about her being frail. Like you could snap her in half. Brittle boned and whisper thin. “I get it. Those things suck.”

She sniffed, smiled weakly. “Yeah?”
“Thanks for coming,” I said. God, I sounded like an idiot. Is that what everyone sounds like to themselves when they say shit like this? Practicing lines. “It’d mean a lot to him, you know. That you were there.”

“Did he, um, talk about me?” she said.

It’s okay to lie if it makes people feel better. And I wanted her to feel better. I did. I’m not a jerk. I know that’s what people think. I know that’s what I look like. I’m not not self-aware. I’m the jock, okay. The douchebag. I get that.

But I didn’t want her to feel bad.

“Yeah,” I said. “A lot. You were one of his best friends.”

She took a deep breath. Something that started in her toes, rattled in her ribs. “That’s good,” she said. “He was.” She clarified, “One of my best friends. Too.”

“Listen,” I said into the lull that followed, when it seemed like Candice wanted to escape again. “We should hang out or something.”

She looked up then. Eyes gray blue. Uncertain. She had a cute nose. A little bit turned up at the end. That’s the one thing I never really liked about Amy. Her nose is too big. She always complained about it being too big, at least. Said she was getting a nose job as soon as she was eighteen.

“Oh,” Candice said. “Sure.” She fidgeted. I noticed immediately that she fidgeted. Pulled her hands into fists and tucked them into her sleeves. Unrolled her fingers. Kept tugging down the cuffs of her shirt. There were gray, nearly transparent sweat stains under her arms.

Then we exchanged numbers. And I wanted to ask her what she liked to do. What you liked to do. What you guys would do together. But she was already leaving the library, and I figured if
I kept hounding her, she’d get sick of me. Or think I was some kind of weirdo stalker. Which I’m not.

Later that night, I went into your room again. I looked at your bookshelf and found Never Let Me Go. The corners of some of the pages were folded over, marking your place or maybe favorite passages. I flipped through the book, not really reading any of it, but noting places where you’d underlined words. You’d dog-eared the last page of the novel. Sketched a black line under the last paragraph:

*I half-closed my eyes and imagined this was the spot where everything I’d ever lost since my childhood had washed up, and I was now standing here in front of it, and if I waited long enough, a tiny figure would appear on the horizon across the field, and gradually get larger until I’d see it was Tommy, and he’d wave, maybe even call.* (Ishiguro 287-288)

I shut the book and tucked it carefully back onto your bookshelf, making sure it looked the same as it did before. I didn’t really want Mom or Dad knowing that I’d been snooping.

***

There’s this thing I’ve been doing lately. Every once in a while when I have a free minute or can’t concentrate on homework. Or when I’m lying in bed and don’t feel like texting Amy or playing video games or watching porn.

I’ve started – basically I’ve started looking up information about car crashes. It started with only collecting stuff about you. You know, stuff in the paper like “Fatal Car Crash Claims Life of Local Teen.” But then I started reading about other car crashes, too. Did you know that 37,461 people died in car accidents last year?
Sometimes I print out articles, too. I don’t pin them up on a bulletin board or anything. Didn’t paper the four walls of my room with clipped articles about crashes: fender benders and six car pileups, body counts, weather conditions, speed of collision, obituaries. Black and white photographs cut out of newspapers. I didn’t make it some kind of shrine.

It’s not like I’m a serial killer. Not looking to make vehicular homicide my thing, or anything. I just think it’s interesting.

The cops said your car was going 60 mph.

Over 200,000 crashes a year are due to sleet and snow, while icy pavement accounts for 150,000 accidents.

As many as six percent of fatal car crashes could actually be suicides.

That’s something no one’s talking about. Not since that cop suggested it when they told us about your accident. It’s like the elephant in the room. Shot the elephant in my pajamas kind of elephant. How he got into my pajamas I’ll never know.

Remember when we were – we must have been around twelve and we watched Duck Soup at, like, midnight. That shit was the funniest thing we’d ever seen. God, it was hilarious. Better than being high, man.

But the cops couldn’t find any proof. No notes or anything. You hadn’t told anyone that you were depressed. I didn’t tell the police that I had your notebook. But there’s nothing in there that – I don’t know. I don’t know what I’m supposed to look for.

I looked into some of those bands you had posters of, too. Hippo Campus has this one song called “Suicide Saturday”:

She could drive
She could drive it

That was where she’d buy her time, yeah.

I didn’t tell Mom and Dad about any of this. I didn’t want to concern them.

I didn’t really tell anyone about any of this.

I talked to Candice. About some of it. We hung out, like I said we should hang out sometimes, so we did.

Candice liked this little hole-in-the-wall coffee shop. It was ten minutes from school. Hell, you probably went there with her. Dave Matthews Band posters on every wall. It was a typical place: sulking baristas, moody lighting, soft, tuneless music, and people tapping at laptops or chatting quietly in the booths squashed against the walls.

It started snowing outside while we were in there. Snowflakes fell outside the window and cast rippling shadows over the table and her hands around her mug.

“Hey,” I said when I joined her at the table. She’d gotten there before me. She ordered her own drink. I didn’t pay. It wasn’t a date.

Candice ordered this trendy matcha latte thing that tasted a little bit like sweetened grass.

“Hi,” she said. And then, “How are you?” She pulled the plastic mixing stick out of her mug. Licked the end. Then chewed on it like it was the end of a pen. Oral fixation, I guess. You hadn’t mentioned that in your journal.

“I’m okay,” I said.

I’m okay is a good response. Default. I can adjust my inflexion however I need to. I’m okay with a swift grin if I want people to actually believe that I’m okay. I’m okay with a small, sad smile and a head bob if I want people to think I’m okay, but in a my twin brother was in a car accident
kind of way. It worked really well. Made the teachers give me the kindly, sad look everyone gave the poor schmuck with the dead brother. Kept people from worrying, because it sounds honest, you know?

“What about you?”

She didn’t look a lot better out of her school uniform. Now she was swallowed by a black hoodie. It came half-way down the thighs of her skinny jeans. She looked lopsided and smothered. Kind of like she was trying to look cute. Like those girls who steal their boyfriend’s hoodies.

But then I remembered that that would have been you. Her boyfriend, I mean. But I don’t think the hoodie was one of yours. Maybe it was.

Is that morbid? To wear your boyfriend’s hoodie when you think he’s dead?

Amy doesn’t have one of my hoodies. She hasn’t asked for one. Am I supposed to offer it? I guess.

“I’m okay,” Candice replied. She took a sip of her latte. Bit her lip.

For a while we sat there and tried not to look at each other. We listened to the chorus of an acoustic piece playing over the shop’s fuzzy speakers. Keaton Henson crooning:

*And there’ll be coins on my eyes*

*There’ll be coins on my eyes*

*To pay Charon*

I wondered whether she liked the same bands that you liked. If maybe she could talk to me about music. If you two had gone to concerts together.
Or books. You met her in English. You probably liked the same books. I thought about mentioning some of the titles I’d memorized off your bookshelves, if maybe I could act like I’d read them, too.

“So, um, how are your parents?”

“They’re okay, too,” I answered. “They’re…you know.” I finished with a shrug, because that was what our parents were. Coexisting like a shrug personified. The in-between stage of grief and moving on, of living together but not living together. “I’m sure Colin talked about it.”

“He said he wished they’d get divorced already,” Candice said, then immediately backtracked like she was afraid she’d offended me. “Sorry. I mean, I think he was sick of the fighting.”

“They don’t fight,” I said. I didn’t know how we’d started talking about our parents. I didn’t want to think about them living or not living, sleeping or not sleeping together. How Dad emerged from the guestroom most mornings, bleary-eyed, straightening his tie.

“It’s mostly a lot of silence,” I clarified. “It’s like this absence, you know? Like they constantly exist ten feet apart.” You can’t see me if I can’t see you.

“Sometimes a loss can make things worse,” Candice said awkwardly. She clutched her mug like an anchor, fingers overlapping.


“My mom is a family and marriage therapist if, you know…” she trailed away. Maybe it was something in my face that told her how ridiculous that suggestion was – as if I was actually going to sit my parents down and give them the business card of Colin’s girlfriend’s therapist Mom. “Sorry, stupid,” Candice laughed.
“Nah, you’re good,” I replied.

“She’s been…” Candice rolled her eyes. For a second I thought I caught a glimpse of who she actually was, hiding under her monstrous hoodie. Not a girl wincing through apologies at a memorial service or fidgeting around questions in the library. “Honestly she’s been really annoying about this whole thing. I get that she’s worried. I get it. And I hate that I’m the thing that’s worrying her. I don’t want to hurt her. But she’s like – God, she’s smothering me.”

“Yeah,” I nodded. For a second it felt safe. For a second I felt like I could tell Candice anything. “Sometimes I’m…not glad. I’m definitely not glad. But relieved, I guess, that there’s this huge other thing for my parents to worry about so they don’t focus on me.”

Then I felt bad for saying it. Wished I hadn’t. God, when’d I get so frikken clumsy?


But Candice didn’t look hurt. She didn’t even look angry or offended. “No,” she said. “I get it. Grief is selfish. Believe me, I get it. By definition, existence is selfish. You are your own main character. You can’t help but relate to the world through yourself.”

“Yeah, I guess,” I said. “It’s more like…I don’t want them to see me right now. I’m glad there’s something else in the way. And that’s selfish. Because it’s like saying I’m glad he’s, you know, gone.”

Candice blinked. And shit. Shit, yeah. I should not have said that. For a minute I’d forgotten that she was your girlfriend. That out of everyone else in the world she probably missed you the most. Other than Mom and Dad. And me.
“It’s weird,” Candice said after a pause. Her voice was soft. She was staring at the table.
Stirring her latte. “I keep…forgetting? I keep expecting to get a text from him.” She suddenly
looked pained. “I’m sorry. You probably don’t want to talk about it. But there’s no one else…”

“No, it’s okay,” I said quickly. “Really. I don’t mind. No one else really knew him. Really
knew him like you did.”

“I just,” she blew out a breath. Suddenly I was afraid she was going to start crying again.
Her face was red, and she balled her hands into fists. “It sucks. I just hate the fact that I constantly
have to explain to people how awesome he was. I hate how he can only mean something to people
because he’s dead. I want to – like – yell at people he was a real person! He was this incredible,
smart, and funny, real, alive person. But I can’t say it in a way that makes people believe it.”

“Yeah,” I breathed.

“Like you know how people always come up with memorials for people after they’re dead?
Or prizes or scholarships or causes? It’s like that. I don’t want his death to mean something. I don’t
want him to be a cautionary tale. I want his life to mean something.”

“Sorry,” she said again. She was blinking now. Her eyes were bright. “I talk too much
when I’m upset. I normally don’t talk at all until I’m suddenly rambling. Sorry.”

“No, no,” I said immediately. “Don’t apologize. He, um, deserves to be talked about.” And
I wanted to hear about you. I had so many questions to ask her that I didn’t know which to ask
first. “How, um, how long were you two…?”

Candice went scarlet right up to her hairline. A slow bleed. Chewed on her lip where I
could see her skin was chapped and peeling. “We weren’t,” she said reluctantly. “Not really. So
that sucks, too.”
And I didn’t know what to say to her. Because what the hell was I supposed to do when I’d literally read about you undressing her?

“He was my best friend,” Candice continues finally. “And I would have said ‘yes’ if he ever asked for something more.”

The silence just drifted there for a little while, twirling in lazy curls like cigarette smoke.

“Do you think—” my heart beat against my ribs. It hurt. You’re not dead, I told myself. Not really. Candice just thought you were. “Do you think he meant to?”

I could see Candice swallow and digest this thought. I knew she’d thought about it before, because she didn’t flinch.

“I don’t know,” she said finally. And in a small voice, “Maybe.”

Her voice slunk into my stomach. Sat there like a slab of ice. I swallowed. “Did he ever...talk to you about it?”

“We talked about a bunch of stuff,” Candice said. She sounded ashamed. She shut her eyes. Maybe it was easier to talk if she couldn’t see me. Spilling secrets in the dark. “I never thought—God. I never thought he would actually—”

“But he didn’t send you a note or—”

“No.”

“It could have been an accident,” I said. Voice tight. Maybe I wanted to spare her. I don’t know. I didn’t want her to think I was accusing her of something. “They said it might have been an accident.”

“Yeah,” she said. Finally, she opened her eyes again. I expected her eyelashes to leave traces of water on her cheeks, but her eyes were dry. “Sorry. I should probably go.”
“That’s okay,” I told her.

“I hope —” she stopped. Started again, “If you ever want to talk, or something, Seth, let me know, okay?”

My stomach swelled. Warm and bubbly. Almost hot. I didn’t really understand what was happening. All I could think, again and again, was she knew you. She’s the only one who really knew you.

“Sure,” I said. “Thanks.”

***

I felt like I was deciphering code when I read and reread your journal at night. There was so much about you I didn’t understand. So much I couldn’t comprehend.

Memory is all life is, you wrote at the top of a page, hedged in with half-robotic spiders.

I stared at the blue and white lines on the notebook paper. The scrawl of your black ink, and I tried to know you.

Life, what we perceive as our current conscious “present” is actually lived in a perpetual transition between the future and the past, the duration of which is much less than the time it takes for our hearts to beat one beat. All we know of life is memory – memory that grows larger with every second, consuming our future and spitting the chewed up, semi-digested bones and sinew of our dreams behind us.

The brief moment in which the future transforms into the past is called the “spacious present,” a term coined by nineteenth-century philosopher E. Robert Kelly. Temporal consciousness, or time perception of human senses, is not a discrete quantity and cannot be accurately measured because there are infinitesimal delays between the duration of perception,
sensory stimulus, sensory response, and objective and subjective duration of the experience occurring within the specious present.

For the sake of simplicity, let’s assume the spacious present can be measured in a second. Let’s also assume that the average human lifespan is 80 years. Or 2,228,800,000 seconds.

99.99999955133 percent of the average lifespan is memory.

That leaves 0.000000044867 percent.

Spoiler alert, that’s the second in which you die. Which probably won’t be consciously perceived anyway.

What was it like? I wondered for the hundredth time. Spilling into the river. Icy water filling your lungs?

What was it like to –

How the hell did you do it?

Anyway, I think I’m a sociopath.

Because I haven’t cried or anything since – you know. The accident, or whatever.

I had my cellphone in my hand before I could stop myself. I texted Candice: Do you think he’s really dead?

I waited for her to reply, and I realized it was already after midnight, so maybe she was sleeping. But then my phone buzzed with an incoming text, so maybe she didn’t sleep much anymore, either.

I don’t see how he couldn’t be, she replied.

They haven’t found his body, I texted back.

You had a memorial service.
That was for my parents to find closure or whatever, I replied.

Closure is important.

I guess. I wanted to ask her more. I wanted to talk to her again. I wished she was here, lying next to me. Just so –

I just wanted to talk to her.

There’s a party on Friday after the game, I texted her. The screen had gone silent. I didn’t want to lose her. You should come.

I don’t usually go to parties, she replied.

You should come anyway, I wrote. It’ll be chill.

I’ll think about it.

I stared at the ceiling. Remember when we used to lay on the living room carpet and look at the ceiling together? Pretending it was a giant cloud. We’d trace imaginary shapes, elephants, dogs, sheep, and cars.

My phone buzzed again, and my heart throbbed. But it was Amy, not Candice.

You up?

I shut off my phone, turned onto my belly, and tried to fall asleep.

***

I didn’t know whether or not Candice was actually going to come to the party. I didn’t see her in the stands during the game. I’d been playing like shit lately, so Coach had me ride the bench for most of the game. I figured I had about two more crap games before Coach stopped being so understanding and started giving me lectures about keeping my head on the court.
The gym smelled like sweat and microwave corndogs from the concession stand. It echoed with the squeak of basketball shoes, shrieking whistles, footsteps, chatter, clamoring cheers. It all felt too loud and too close.

I zeroed in on the faces in the stands: one by one like I was looking through a telescope. There was Amy, in the front row with some of her other friends. She was wearing the team girlfriend uniform: green and yellow sweatshirt and hairbands. Face paint in high stripes across her cheekbones.

Dad was there, too. Mom couldn’t make it. It wasn’t unusual. They’d been rehearsing custody battles over our sporting events, science fairs, field trips, and birthday parties for as long as I could remember.

We lost. 57-53.

Coach gave us a rousing speech about still-top-of-our-division. We were heading into the playoffs next week with good prospects.

Brandon punched me on the shoulder as I left the locker room, said he’d see me later.

I thought about texting Candice again to check if she was going. But I didn’t want to seem clingy.

I took a quick shower when I got home. I didn’t get dressed up, or anything, but I put on a little cologne. Wanted to at least look okay. Then I scarfed down some defrosted ziti, part of the endless parade of casseroles we’d gotten from neighbors and family and Dad’s coworkers.

The party was at Noah’s house. His dad was this big-time glue salesman and was in Chicago for the weekend for a business trip; his mom had tailed along, so the house was empty.
It wasn’t a huge party, mostly upperclassmen. By the time I got there, people had already split into groups: lingering around the dining room drinking beer and eating Doritos, a couple girls half-heartedly bobbing their shoulders to “Sunflower” in the middle of the living room, one or two people passed a joint around on the back porch. There was a rumor about molly in the basement, but I didn’t feel like checking it out.

I headed straight for the kitchen to pour myself a Solo cup of coke and vodka. Brandon was in there, rooting through the fridge. His girlfriend Steph was propped up against the table, forking leftover Chinese into her mouth.

“Amy’s looking for you,” Steph said around her mouthful of fried rice.

“Yeah?” I said and took a slug of my drink. It burned going down, but the vodka flavor was disguised enough by the coke that I didn’t care. The point was to drink it all quick enough that I didn’t have time to wonder whether it was a good idea. Any of it was a good idea.

“She said you’ve been ignoring her,” Steph said, frowning. I never got the impression Steph and Amy were super close friends, but maybe this was part of some kind of girl code. Pack mentality or some shit.

“I’ve been busy,” I said.

“You should hang out with us more,” Brandon emerged from the fridge with a Pyrex container of fried chicken. “You spend too much time at home.”

I shrugged, looking for an excuse, “Mom wants me around.”

“Makes sense,” Steph said, and I didn’t understand how she’d switched so quickly from frosty to sympathetic. “My mom was crazy about that kind of thing after my grandfather died.”

“Yeah,” I said. I downed the rest of my drink. Poured myself another.
Then I left, because I didn’t like talking about you with other kids from school. Especially my friends. None of them really knew you. I didn’t want to hear from them about how they hadn’t realized we were all that close, hear from Noah about how he got real depressed after his dog died last summer, how Brandon had totaled two cars in six months and, *shit, man, that shit’s real scary.* Hear from Amy about how she was there for me if I ever wanted to talk.

Amy collided with me as soon as I stepped out of the kitchen.

“*Babe,*” she crooned, and attached herself to my chest. “Where’ve you been?”

“Getting a drink,” I said easily and planted a kiss on her lips. She tasted like beer. Her body was liquid in my hands, and I knew she’d already had a lot more to drink than I had.

I don’t know if you went to a lot of parties, but they’re not actually what they’re made out to be in movies. They aren’t, like, wild. It’s mostly a lot of standing around with half-empty cups of alcohol. There isn’t even a lot of sex.

Everyone knows that one couple who disappears upstairs, but beyond that, it’s not too raunchy. It’s all about the vibe, you know? If someone else is making out in the corner, then it’s okay for you to do it, too.

I don’t usually like to make the first move. I don’t want to be part of that clingy, sloppy couple who everyone takes pictures of and hollers at to get a room.

But, when Amy backed me into the corner, stood on her tip-toes, and attached her lips to mine, well, I didn’t stop her.

I felt just enough on the edge of buzzed and sober – on the boarder of throwing impulse control out the window – that I honestly didn’t give a shit.
Amy sucked my bottom lip into her mouth, tongued across the ridge of my teeth, and she was warm and wet and we’d done this so many times by now that she knew exactly how much I liked it when she edged her tongue deeper into my mouth, curled it around mine, put a hand on the back of my neck and thumbed my earlobe. Crooked a knee between my thighs –

I opened my eyes in time to see Candice headed toward the front door, coat over her arm.

And I disentangled myself from Amy with a wet pop. She whined in protest.

“One sec, baby,” I mumbled.

I don’t know what about Candice always has me running after her. I told myself I felt responsible for her being at the party. Wanted her to have a good time because I’d invited her. Didn’t want her to leave yet because –

I was still holding my cup of coke and vodka. I couldn’t remember how many I’d drank, but I felt dizzy and stupid, so I’d probably had more than the two I remembered pouring.

I shouldered open the door and found Candice standing on the front porch, half-swallowed by the night, one arm in her jacket.

“Hey,” I said. “You came.” I concentrated on not slurring. On not laughing or smiling too large, but the frigid air felt exhilarating against my hot skin, and the noises of the party clattered inside my head.

“Oh, hey,” she said. She shrugged on the other half of her coat.

“Y’kay?” I asked.

“Yeah,” she nodded. “Yeah. I’m just not feeling this tonight. I’ll see you later.”

Her eyes reflected the porchlight. Half her face was in shadow, the other half was blotchy red from the heat of the house and maybe embarrassment.
In that moment, nothing about her was pretty: patchy skin, lips pressed thin and white, mascara smudges under her eyes, hair frizzy and falling out of her pink hair-tie, but suddenly I forgot to ask her if she had a ride home, or laugh and tell her to stick around, have a drink.

And maybe it was because my dick was still pressing into the fly of my jeans, maybe because I could still taste the beer on Amy’s saliva, but I suddenly remembered what Candice had told me, about you and her: We weren’t. Not really.

And then I thought about what you wrote about her in your notebook: *God has lived for millennia. He has seen continents formed and dissolved. Oceans flood and dry up. Mountains thrust from the collisions of tectonic plates. All of this he saw in a blink of an eye. But feeling her lips on mine, vanilla soft, her warm breath in my mouth: it’s eternity.*

I grabbed Candice’s upper arm and pulled her close, chest to chest, and planted my lips against hers when I saw them open in surprise. She was brittle in my arms. I pushed my tongue through the barrier of her teeth and she bit down. Hard. I tasted salty blood before I registered pain. She shoved me in the chest with both hands, and I let go.

She sprang away, breathing hard.

“What the fuck?” she squeaked. She wiped her lips with the back of her hand. She took another step back.

“What the fuck?” she echoed, voice stronger this time and trembling with maybe anger. She swiped at her eyes.

She was crying again. Somewhere behind the swarm of thoughts in my muzzy brain and the pulsing need of my gross erection, I recognized guilt boiling in my stomach because I’d made her cry.
“Candice.” I reached for her.

“Don’t touch me.” She jerked away. “Don’t ever touch me again. What’s wrong with you? You’re not him, so why don’t you stop pretending?” She turned and fled down the porch stairs and I watched her jog into the darkness.

My mouth was full of blood, and I spat over the banister. The taste of it on my tongue mingled with the smell of beer in my nostrils, the slog of alcohol in my belly, the familiar, aching ball of rubber bands in my chest, and a new, sharp sting of Candice’s words through my jugular.

I thought I was going to puke, and I braced my elbows on the railing, but the dizziness and nausea passed and left me cold. Drake thudded through the walls. Other party noises slipped under the door. Were stifled by the icy breeze.

_I don’t want to be here, _I thought. _I don’t want to be here anymore._

***

_I saw you, _Amy texted me. _You and her._

I woke late the next morning, and Amy’s message waited for me. I felt like shit. There were twin faults of pain from my temples to my jaw, and my mouth was stuffed with cotton. Nausea sat wet and heavy in the base of my stomach.

The light from my cellphone was a handful of sewing needles shot into my pupils, and I shut my eyes. But then there was only a red smear of light bleeding through my eyelids from the windows of my bedroom. Bright and insistent.

I put my phone on my stomach and felt it rise, like a brick, with my every breath. I didn’t want to think about what to say to her. I wished I didn’t remember. I wished it hadn’t happened. I didn’t have any excuse.
My phone vibrated again. It shivered through my belly, up my ribs.

I didn’t want to see what else Amy had to say to me, but I wanted it to hurt.

I wanted to hurt.

I picked up the screen, thumbed open the screen, and stared at the words waiting there:

*Just because your brother’s dead doesn’t give you the right to be a total douchebag.*

Amy was right. Candice was right. I remembered grabbing her last night, fixing my lips over hers. I remembered how she squirmed in my arms, how I tightened my grip.

I was disgusting.

And I’d ruined it. Everything. I’d ruined everything.

And I remembered what you wrote, scribbled in shame-faced, cramped letters:

*I pressed the blade against the pale underside of my arm, pulled it across so it left a small trail of tiny cuts. Ran over it again. Made one seamless slice. And blood pooled out of the small cut, ran in watery stripes down my skin.*

*It belonged to me. I controlled this. It was real. And the fact that I could feel it meant I was real, too.*


And maybe I was supposed to text Amy. Tell her sorry. Tell her it was an accident. Ask her to take me back.

Instead, I found Candice’s text thread, blank since earlier this week when I asked if she really thought you were dead.

*I’m sorry, I texted her. I was drunk. I didn’t know what I was doing.*
I could hear someone moving around in the kitchen downstairs, making coffee or scrambling eggs. Even before whatever happened to you, we weren’t the kind of family who ate breakfast together. Dad didn’t do Saturday morning brunch with fresh-squeezed orange juice and pancakes and homefries and bacon.

My phone buzzed. It was Candice.

_I’d rather you didn’t message me._

*Please* – I immediately started typing, but then backspaced it. I thought about how I could get her to listen. I wanted to talk to her. I didn’t want anything else from her, I swear.

*Can I drop a couple things off at your house?* I asked her. *You don’t have to talk to me.*

And then guilt rumbled in my stomach. I felt sick. I slid out of bed, padded out of my room and across the room, nudged open your door and stared at the empty, static tomb it had become: everything exactly how you left it. A thin sheen of dust on top of the dresser and shelves. Your clothes were still hanging in the closet. Sweaters and t-shirts folded neatly in drawers.

*Fine,* Candice replied, and sent her address even though I already knew it from your notebook. I told her I’d be there in an hour.

I stepped into your room. Carefully peeled scotch tape off the corners of the posters on your wall, looked for books that I thought Candice might like. I didn’t know which ones were your favorites. I didn’t know if you’d talked to her about any of them. I didn’t know how to make it feel meaningful.

It felt like I was looking at a shell. A candy-coated, multicolored eggshell, sucked dry. And I didn’t know what was supposed to fill it.
I gathered a few things, then I showered, put on a pair of jeans and my basketball hoodie. Shouted to Mom in the kitchen on my way out the door, smell of coffee following me out.

It was only after I shut the front door behind me that I realized it had snowed last night, coated everything in a film of white slush. My sneakers skidded across the driveway on the way to my car. It was cold enough in the cab that my fingers shook as I stuck the keys in the ignition.

I plugged my phone into the dash, pulled up your Spotify playlist. I’d been playing your music enough that I recognized Nothing but Thieves as soon as the first note of “If I get High” strummed through the speakers:

And we run
And we run
And we run
And we run
And we run
And we run
And we run

Semantic satiation. That was what it was called when repetition caused a word or phrase to lose all its perceived meaning. A needle skipping on a record. Like love, love, love, gone, gone, gone, dead, dead, dead.

Outside, the snow turned the naked trees and shrubbery into gray and white outlines.

Candice only lived twenty minutes away. Across the Niantic. And, driving up Oil Mill Road, tires grinding on the slick roads, it occurred to me that maybe you were driving to see her
when you lost control of your car. When you turned the wheel sharply toward the edge of the road. When you careened down the embankment. When your car pitched headfirst into the frozen river.

Right about here.

Right about here your car would have slipped. Rumbled through underbrush and frozen shrubs. Tire tracks in the powder-fresh snow. Crashed into the ice at 60 mph. Windshield shattered. Front bumper compressed like a dent on a plastic bottle. Seatbelt limp, dangling against the door because you hadn’t put it on.

Or had taken it off, maybe.

Airbags deployed, empty, sagging pillowcases, ragged from the broken glass, when the tow truck dragged the wreck back out of the ice.

There wasn’t any blood. Nothing. Like someone snapped their fingers and you disappeared. Filtered off into the air like a puff of warm breath on the icy air. Nothing But Thieves asked me:

If I get high enough

If I get high enough

Will I see you again?

I had a cardboard box filled with the odds and ends of your life, and I wondered if maybe I was completing your final mission. If I was completing the task you’d began – sharing your life with Candice in a way you should have been brave enough to do yourself.

The song faded in the speakers and a new one took its place, and I kept driving.

I showed up at Candice’s house fifteen minutes later. She must have been waiting for my car, because, before I’d stepped into her driveway, her front door was open, spilling a triangle of light onto the front steps.
She hung there on the threshold, one shoulder inside and one outside, like she was prepared to dart back in if I made a wrong move.

“Here.” I held out the cardboard box and tried to look nonthreatening. She glared at me warily and didn’t move to take the box. I wanted to make a joke about it not being a bomb. “I don’t know if you’re gonna, like…want any of it,” I said lamely. “You don’t have to keep it if you don’t want to. And if, I don’t know, there was something specific that you wanted that’s not there…you could come over some time and get it.”

“Okay,” she said slowly, and carefully pulled the box out of my arms.

“It’s not like he had a will,” I said.

She gulped. I tracked her throat as she swallowed. “So you still haven’t found a note or anything?”

I shrugged. “Nah.” And ridiculously, wildly, I teetered on the idea of telling her about your journal.

“I’m sorry,” I said instead. Quickly. Before the silence could linger. “By the way…for, you know. I shouldn’t have done that.” I thought about telling her I was drunk again. I thought about making another excuse.

“Yeah?” she said. She cocked an eyebrow. And it made her look fierce. I remember how she’d pushed me away at the party. It struck me suddenly how little I really knew her. How little, maybe, you really knew her.

“I wanted…” I rubbed the back of my neck. “I just wanted to get to know someone he knew. I’m sorry.”
Candice breathed in. I saw her narrow shoulders rise and fall under her hoodie. Her breath fogged up in the cold air. I saw she wasn’t wearing shoes, just fluffy socks pulled over the ankles of her leggings.

“I get it,” she said finally. “I mean. Sort of. I wanted to get to know you, too.”

There was warm air leaking out of her front door. I caught a whiff of coffee and cigarette smoke.

“Really?”

She nodded. Bit her lip. “It’s like he’s a ghost,” she said finally, almost blurted it out, and her cheeks flushed pink. “We’re what’s draped over him. I keep trying to tug off the sheet.”

My throat was suddenly dry. “Yeah.”

And I wanted to tell her about how you’d written about hurting yourself. How there was a certain kind of pain, right on the edge of too much, a constant ache, almost a burn: and that was the sweet spot. About how I felt like I was constantly living in that sweet spot.

“I feel like I’m grieving a future I never got to experience,” she said. Once again, like it had been at the coffee shop, the words kept dripping off her tongue. “And I don’t know what to do with that. The almost.”

I wanted to tell her about how we used to dig in the dirt in the backyard. Plastic dump trucks and shovels. Building castles and knocking them down. Poking at anthills. That time we found a yellowjacket nest and got thirty stings apiece. How you wouldn’t stop crying.

God, there was so much she didn’t know about you.

So much I didn’t know.
Candice juggled the box on her hip so she could raise an arm. She cuffed her cheek with the heel of her hand and sniffed, and I hadn’t even realized she was crying.

It started snowing again. Quiet flurries. The wind rattled the skeletal branches of the tree in Candice’s front yard.

“You can come inside, if you want,” Candice said. Maybe she’d suddenly noticed the weather, the chill and the snow and the fact that I was shivering slightly on the porch under my hoodie.

“It’s okay,” I said. I didn’t want to make her feel uncomfortable. I didn’t know how to move around her anymore. I was questioning everything. How I breathed around her. How close my hands were to her body.

“Are you, um,” she puffed out a white breath of air. We both watched it dissipate into the gray sky. “Talking to anyone?”

“Like…?” I prompted her. Because the only person I was talking to was her. Or maybe she meant Amy.

She screwed up her face, nose wrinkled. “Like a therapist or something. Or the school counselor.”

“Oh,” I said. Shit. “No.”

She bobbed from toe to heel. I could tell she was uncomfortable. “It’s…it helps, you know? To get things out.”

“Yeah,” I said. “I guess. I just…don’t really talk about stuff like that. Not to people I don’t know, at least.”

“It’s not good to keep it all in,” she said.
I wanted to leave, then. I could feel the need rising in my chest. Choking me. “I gotta get home.”

“Are you gonna be okay?” And it sounded like she actually cared. Maybe she was thinking about you driving off the road. Slipping on black ice or whatever. Lost in the cold water.

“I’ll be fine,” I shrugged.

“You can talk to me still,” she said quickly. “If you wanted to, I mean. It’s okay. I’ll be okay.”

“Okay,” I said.

“Drive safe, alright?” she said.

“Yeah.”

***

On the way back from Candice’s house I found an overturned minivan in a ditch on the side of the road.

It looked like a family of four. The father was being loaded into the back of an ambulance with a brace in a chokehold around his neck.

I pulled over to the side of the road behind the last police car. I could see the mother holding one of the squirming kids to her chest. A tear of blood ran down the mother’s cheek, and she was shaking in her oversized parka with the fur of her hood blending in with her blond hair.

“Thank God thank God thank God,” she kept whispering. Her other child was standing next to her, hands in mittens and gripping her sleeve. I couldn’t tell if it was a boy or a girl because of the hood pulled up against the snow.
The crash was illuminated by the pulsating emergency lights. There was a firetruck along with the ambulance and a police cruiser. EMTs and cops mulled around the van, speaking into radios or dashing back to the ambulance for medical supplies.

I pushed my door open, shrill winter air bursting into the car. I slid out of my seat and stepped onto the road, and frost crunched under my sneakers. The wind cut through my jeans and sweatshirt. I shielded my eyes with my hand and my fingers were already stiffening in the cold.

Urgent voices floated back to me on the wind. I couldn’t see any bodies in the dark. I wondered if anyone had died.

“Hey! Hey, you. Kid!”

The mother’s nose was cherry red. She was looking at the stretcher as the paramedics loaded her husband into the back.

“Hey, kid!” a cop was approaching, protecting his cap from blowing off with one hand. “Nothing to see here. You’re in the way. Move on now, kid.”

“Is everyone okay?” I asked.

“Everyone’s fine, kid. You’re blocking the way. Get back into your car.”

I wasn’t looking at the officer. The snow swirled in little eddies across the two-lane road, otherwise empty except for the emergency vehicles with their flashing lights and sirens. The officer kept telling me to get into my car and I tugged my feet off the slick pavement and ducked back through the door.

I sat there for a minute. I wondered how many cars had gone off around this bend. How many people had died on this road. I watched the ambulance pull out from the curb and speed away.
And I turned my car back on. The wheels sputtered without finding traction in the slush. I thought about following the ambulance to the emergency room, cluttered with frantic energy and noises: shrill ringing phones, chattering voices, clatter of gurneys, the chalky scent of antiseptic.

And I thought about how hospitals were where people died. Where they worried and waited and cried and lost hope. And I thought about how you drove into the river. How you never made it to the hospital. How you never said goodbye. How you didn’t leave a note.

And I thought about how your body washed down the river, into the bay, into the ocean. About how maybe they’d find you sometime in the spring, after the ice melted.

Then I did a u-turn in the middle of the road, went the opposite direction of the ambulance, running along the road beside the river, back toward Candice, back the way you’d driven. Followed the line of our own personal River Styx.

Full of bodies floating across the threshold of life and death. And you were just one more of those bodies. Under the water. Unable to breathe. So damn cold. I wondered if you were face up or face down when you drifted downstream.

The sky was heavy with gray clouds. Choked with them.

I was hurtling down a white tunnel of snow. The next curve kept popping up without any notice. And the next one after that. I didn’t know where they came to an end. I felt a nagging in my chest, like I was getting closer to a finish line with every turn, but I couldn’t see where it ended. Maybe there wasn’t an end. Maybe the finish line kept getting farther and farther away. I’d never get there.
I couldn’t get comfortable. It was like the seat didn’t fit right. I felt charged. Electricity chugged through my veins, and I couldn’t stop moving. Tapped my fingers on the wheel. Jogged my left knee.

Abruptly, the only thought in my head was *too tight*. The car was too damn tight.

I shoved the wheel to the side, stomped the breaks because I was pretty sure I was going to drive headlong into a tree. Into a river. My car skidded on the ice.

*Too tight too tight too damn tight.*

Like a damn coffin.

My hands were shaking. I thought I was going to throw up. My lungs stuck to my ribs so they couldn’t expand. I was dizzy. Drunk from the lack of oxygen.

I unlocked the door and swiveled my legs onto the pavement, braced my elbow on my knees and put my forehead against my palms. Heaved in huge lungsful of cold, still air. It smelled like winter: bleak and white and pure.

I didn’t want to fall apart, but I could feel the threads unraveling. I didn’t want to think about your body, bloated and pale after weeks in the water, washing up on some pebbly shore, or hooked out of the water by a fishing boat.


Bile rose in my throat, and I launched out of the car, caught myself against a tree: a threadbare sapling, shivering in the wind. I shut my eyes. I tried to remember what you looked like before the accident. You looked like me. You didn’t look like me. Olive skin and dark hair and shorter by a few inches and dark-rimmed glasses and a shy-almost smile at the dinner table when
Mom asked you how your day was and your door shut down the hall, music trailing out of the space between the door and the carpet.

I tottered down the incline toward the river, pushing through the snow, sliding and shuffling down the frozen ground.

I thought about diving in. Hacking my way through the ice and finding your body underneath. Yanking you out. Pulling you back onto the embankment. Pressing air back into your cold and shriveled lungs.

I wondered how cold the water was, if I would freeze if I dove in. If my muscles would cramp and spasm before I made it far enough to find you under the slush and fractured ice.

_Fifteen minutes_, my brain supplied, because I’d looked it up during one of my Google kicks. Fifteen minutes or less before unconsciousness in 32.5-degree water.

My boots crunched on the snow. The clouds were too heavy overhead. They kept belching flake upon flake, turning the landscape into a black and white photograph.

God, I missed you.

The thought stuck in my throat. Strangled me.

I missed you so badly it was like my heart was expanding swiftly and unceasingly inside my chest, crushing my ribs.

And I knew it then. I knew it like someone plunged a blade through my spine and severed the nerves through my arms and legs. Numb. Tingling. I knew it.

You were dead.

You were dead. You weren’t coming back.
I fumbled for my phone, thumbed open her contact information, pressed the call button and listened to the phone ring.

“Seth?” Candice’s voice came through, crackling, faint. “What’s up?”

“Candice?” I breathed.

“Are you okay?”

“He’s dead,” I told her, because the fact was too large to keep inside me anymore. My eyes burned. “Candice, he’s dead.”

“Yeah,” Candice said softly. Sadly. “He is, Seth.”

“Fuck him,” I said. And dammit. Dammit, Colin. Because it wasn’t supposed to be like this. It wasn’t supposed to end like this. It wasn’t supposed to end at all. Not for a good long while.

And I know – look, I know we didn’t always get along, okay? I know we maybe didn’t talk as much as we should. We didn’t hang out with each other a ton. But dammit. Because you were still supposed to be my best man. We were supposed to sit around at awkward family holiday meals and argue about politics and shit.

I thought about what Candice said, about grieving a future she never got to experience.

And I am so Goddamn angry with you. I want to shake you until your teeth rattle. Shake you until I fill your skin with warmth again. Until your eyes snap back open and you smile, pull some crap about it all being some big joke.

“My mom says hope is a bastard,” Candice was still talking on the other side of the phone. I watched the shadow of the river pull passed the cloudy ice. “People say it helps, that we shouldn’t ever give it up – she calls that fortune cookie wisdom. Sounds nice on paper, but in reality it hurts worse to hope than it does to just let go.”
“Do you believe in heaven?” I asked so quietly I was convinced my lips hadn’t moved at all.

“Yeah,” Candice said. “I guess. Mostly I guess I don’t know how not to believe in heaven. Do you?”

I shrugged. It was cold. My nose dripped and I rubbed my face with my arm. Her voice drilled pinprick holes through my skull. With luck, she’d retreat before she got too far in.

“I don’t know,” I said finally. “Not really.” I paused. Swallowed. “Did Colin?” And there was so damn much that I didn’t know about you.

“I don’t know,” Candice whispered.

“Will that matter?” I said. And I didn’t want her to answer. I squeezed my eyes shut. Ignored how a couple hot tears dribbled off my lashes.

“I don’t know,” Candice said again. She sounded so damn sad and conflicted that I wished I hadn’t asked. But I couldn’t stop myself.

“What about – you know,” I said. “If he meant to do it. Will that matter?”

“I think God would understand,” Candice said at last. Wind whipped down the river gully, cutting through my sweatshirt. I shivered. “I think He’d see the suffering. I don’t think He’d – I don’t know.”

“Yeah,” I said. “I wished I’d –” I stopped. Because there was no way on earth I could put words to the cavernous, expansive void of what and how much I wished.

“It’s not who he was, you know,” Candice said softly. “If he – you know, if it was intentional. That’s not all he was. It’s something that happened to him. It wasn’t – you can never really know all that someone is. And Colin was a lot more than that.”
I opened my eyes again. For a moment I’d forgotten that Candice wasn’t right next to me. Close enough to watch her stomach gently rise and fall with each breath she took, exhale warm on my face. Close enough for her hand to dangle next to mine, fingers brushing but not entwining, her hand milky white and crackling dry in the winter air.

“I tried a couple weeks ago,” Candice breathed through the phone. “Right after Colin. I – that’s why I missed so much school. I was in the hospital for a week.”

“Oh,” I said stupidly. Because I didn’t know what to say to a girl who’d just confessed to attempting suicide. I wanted to ask her how she’d done it. I wanted to ask her if she regretted it. Regretted trying. Or if she wished it had worked.

“Why?” I asked instead.

“I just….” she hesitated. “The idea of him being gone…I don’t know. The idea of living without him, of having to actually deal with it – it felt too big. I was so tired.”

“Tired?” I said.

“The world feels so hopeless sometimes,” Candice continued. “There didn’t seem to be any point. Life sucks. There’s so much hate and hurt that I felt crushed under it. I felt so – I am so utterly insignificant. There is literally nothing I can do to help fix things. But I’m, ah…better now. Like I’m on meds and I go to therapy. I’m happy I didn’t…it didn’t work.”

“What did you do?” I said. I told myself I didn’t really want to know. I wondered if maybe she drove her car off the road. I wondered if maybe she dropped into a frozen river.

“Pills,” she said, like I’d asked her what she needed from the grocery store. “But I threw them up and my mom found me. She totally freaked out. I wasn’t even crying. I don’t think I really
knew what I was doing. I’m happy she found me, though. It was…impulsive. Mostly I remember feeling really embarrassed. Which sounds stupid, I know.”

“It’s not stupid,” I said. I searched for the right words to say, but I couldn’t find any.

“Seth?” she said, and she suddenly sounded frightened. “Are you okay? Are you home right now?”

“I’m fine,” I told her, and didn’t know whether or not that was really true. I thought about what she’d said about impulsive decisions. I thought about the cold water. Thought about how long it would take until I couldn’t feel it anymore. Fifteen minutes.

“I think I’m going to go home,” I told her.

“That’s good,” Candice blew out a long breath. “That’s really good. Can you text me when you get there?”

“Sure,” I said.

“Good,” Candice said again. “Thanks.”

We said goodbye.

I clambered back up the cliff. It was a lot harder getting up than it had been getting down, and when I finally got back to the road, my fingers were raw and bleeding from clutching at ice and rock to haul myself back up.

I got back into the car, shut the door behind me, and the wind continued to batter against the metal and glass.

I turned the key in the ignition. The engine sputtered to life. It would have been so easy to yank the lever into neutral. Send the car rolling down the embankment and into the frozen river. That’s what really stood out to me: how easy it would be.
Is that why you did it? Because it was so easy?

Just this massive, earthshaking decision and it was so Goddamn easy. And you didn’t even tell us goodbye. Wow, what a frikken cliché. I can’t believe I’m mad at you for never saying goodbye.

I don’t even know why I’m telling you this, man. I don’t know why I’m bothering to write it all out to you, and I don’t know what good it’s going to do because it’s not like you’ll ever read it. And you’ll never know I read your journal, or I met Candice, or you’ll never know how much Candice liked you and wished things had been different.

I just didn’t know.

I didn’t know you. You bugged me sometimes. We’d argue. I’d snap. I’d yell at you to turn off your stupid music. I’d make fun of your books and your goody-two-shoes grades. You didn’t come to my basketball games, and it pissed me off. I called you a pussy for not coming to parties.

And I never thought I’d miss it. I never thought I’d wish it was different. And I don’t even remember what your voice sounds like. I can’t remember what you looked like angry or smiling or laughing.

This all probably sounds really stupid. But you’re not here.

So, this is me saying I’m sorry, okay? I’m sorry. I don’t even know what for anymore. I’m just really sorry.

And I get it. At least parts of it I think I get.

And I’m going to –

I guess I’m going to stick it out, okay? In case you were worried. I don’t know if I really want to, right now. But I’m just going to stick around.
I guess that’s all I’ve really got to say.
Afterward: The Depiction of Suicide in Young Adult Fiction

“‘It’s like he’s a ghost,’ she said finally, almost blurted it out, and her cheeks flushed pink. ‘We’re what’s draped over him.’” This is the image that struck me most insistently as I wrote “And We Run.” I wanted to write about a ghost covered in a white sheet. The story would be the sheet, and the ghost below would be an absence so tangible it became its own character. The ghost became Colin, and the story circles around the unfillable void that is left behind when someone dies.

Colin explains in his journal that “Memory is all life is.” The present is only a moment of transition between the future and the past. Memory is ultimately unreliable and insoluble. Seth grapples with this idea throughout the novella, juxtaposing his own memories of Colin with the memories of those around him and Colin’s words in his journal. Seth is horrified throughout the story with how little he and others knew about Colin. At Colin’s memorial service, Seth recalls his mother’s assumption that Colin’s favorite color was orange: “Orange hadn’t been your favorite color since you were maybe seven years-old. I don’t remember what your favorite color was now, or if you even had one.” Seth calls upon his memories in an effort to rebuild the brother he remembers from childhood, but this is ultimately unsatisfactory. In response, Seth attempts to reconstruct Colin from the other scraps he has of Colin’s life: Colin’s journal, his music, his books, and his almost-girlfriend Candice. This all falls painfully flat, however, when Seth finally realizes that Colin has drifted entirely out of his reach – he realizes that memory is all he has left, and memory will never be an adequate replacement for what has been lost. Colin is incontrovertibly separated from Seth and from Candice. Candice mourns this very fact when she says, “I feel like
I’m grieving a future I never got to experience […] And I don’t know what to do with that. The almost.”

Seth’s obsession with Colin’s life coincides with his denial about his death. Seth refuses to admit that Colin’s death may, in fact, have been intentional and insists that Colin might even be alive. Seth becomes more and more entralled with Colin’s past life so that he can continue to ignore the fact that Colin is dead. Seth fixates on his brother’s past relationship with Candice, even going so far as to think that he is somehow filling in pieces of the relationship in ways Colin was not able to do, himself. Seth thinks, “I wondered if maybe I was completing your final mission. If I was completing the task you’d began – sharing your life with Candice in a way you should have been brave enough to do yourself.” Candice, however, refuses to let Seth stand in for Colin. After Seth kisses Candice at a party, Candice pushes him away and angrily tells him, “You’re not him, so why don’t you stop pretending?”

I initially struggled writing Candice. She enters the story under Seth’s diminishing gaze, when he describes her: “Everything about her was barely above a whisper: her thin hair, narrow frame, and transparent eyelashes beaded with tears.” And the next time she enters the story, she is heavily sexualized by Colin’s descriptions in his journal. Yet I did not want to leave Candice as the romanticized “Manic Pixie Dream Girl” that exists in so much young adult fiction, especially young adult fiction that centers around mental health concerns, relying on broken but beautiful heroines to entice the hero out of their troubles or exist as merely the just-out-of-reach love interest.

An example of this stereotype comes from Looking for Alaska by John Green. In Looking for Alaska, the protagonist, Miles, meets the haughty, beguiling, and troubled Alaska Young at his new boarding school. Alaska is an angsty and mysterious teenage girl with a dark past, but this is
part of her appeal. Alaska becomes especially alluring after she dies in a drunk driving accident –
an accident Miles feels responsible for after he let her leave his dorm while emotionally distressed
and intoxicated. The reason why Alaska rushed out of the dorm in the middle of the night in order
to drive frantically off campus is a mystery, and the second half of the book is dedicated to figuring
out what had so upset her and where she was driving to when she crashed her car. The
glamorization of Alaska in Green’s book is, in part, deliberate – she is also meant to subvert the
trope of the Manic Pixie Dream Girl, and Miles is eventually called out for his fascination with
her when a friend says, “You don’t even care about her! […] All that matters is you and your
precious fucking fantasy that you and Alaska had this goddamned secret love affair and she was
going to leave Jake for you and you’d live happily ever after” (Green 170-171). The problem is,
however, that despite Green’s attempted subversion of the trope, Alaska never becomes less
alluring or more human to Miles or the book’s readers. The mysterious circumstances of her death,
in fact, makes her that much more intriguing. Ultimately, Alaska’s death becomes the core around
which the entire novel revolves, and the tragic circumstances of her death become the climax of
the book, turning her into something of a martyr and certainly a mythical figure for Miles and the
rest of her friends.

*Looking for Alaska* is hardly the only young adult novel that deals with the heavy topic of
teenage mental health issues. Multiple young adult novels have been released dealing with these
topics, especially in the last two decades. Popular titles include *It’s Kind of a Funny Story* by Ned
Vizzini, *The Astonishing Color of After* by Emily X. R. Pan, and *Thirteen Reasons Why* by Jay
Asher – the latter rising to infamy after the 2017 Netflix adaptation, *13 Reasons Why*, received so
much backlash for its glorification of teen suicide and sexual assault.
Approximately 10 to 20 percent of adolescents (ages 10 to 19 years) experience a mental health condition. 50 percent of all mental health conditions manifest by 14 years old. Globally, for teens ages 15 to 19 years, suicide is the third leading cause of death (World Health Organization). Because mental health issues are such a common experience among adolescents, it is natural that mental health would be such a popular topic in young adult literature. YA fiction allows adolescents and young adults to relate to contemporary concerns, important societal topics, and stories that represent personal anxieties and interests. However, given that adolescents and young adults are so at risk for mental health conditions, it is important that they are exposed to truthful representations and accurate information about mental health in the media, and, ideally, messages that will inspire hope and recovery.

*Thirteen Reasons Why* is one young adult novel that received backlash for romanticizing teen suicide and providing insufficient information about teen mental health concerns. *Thirteen Reasons Why* follows a high school student, Clay, who is sent a box of thirteen audio tapes. These tapes are, in fact, recorded by fellow high school student, Hannah Baker, who recently committed suicide – these tapes each contain one reason why she killed herself and targets one person for contributing to her decision. One issue critics had with the book was the fact that, although *Thirteen Reasons Why* highlights suicide, it doesn’t discuss mental health directly. Although the book hints that Hannah may be depressed, the book does not directly correlate her suicide with a mental health issue. Instead, the book blames specific people and situations for Hannah’s death, which could possible lead to the damaging assumption that “suicide is often unrelated to a mental health disorder and, therefore, cannot be treated” (Hendrickson 12-14).
Additionally, the book unintentionally rationalizes Hannah’s suicide. It sets up an alarming paradigm when it implies that people can be directly at fault for causing someone else’s suicide. Yes, the book’s messages about bullying and sexual assault are cogent and important, but putting the burden of blame entirely on someone else for a suicide is unfair and does not helpfully contribute to discussions about suicidality (202). Additionally, setting up such a direct cause and effect correlation risks rationalizing Hannah’s decision to end her life when the book stages suicide as her only option. The book’s inner mechanisms conspire against Hannah until her suicide seems like the only logical dramatic resolution to the plot. Hannah is unintentionally witness to a friend’s rape at a party; she is repeatedly sexually harassed and accosted; she is constantly bullied, and, even when she is approached by a friendly influence, Clay, or her school guidance counselor, Mr. Porter, she resists their help and accuses them of not doing enough to save her: she explains on her tapes that “A lot of you cared, just not enough” (Asher 280). By never showing that Hannah’s suicide was preventable, the book unconsciously sends the message that suicide is sometimes the right answer, or that suicide is inevitable.

*Thirteen Reasons Why* establishes two additional troubling points about teen suicide: one, Hannah’s suicide is transformed from a tragedy into a revenge fantasy, and, two, Hannah’s suicide becomes a stepping stone for Clay to become a better person. This first point, that *Thirteen Reasons Why* is a revenge fantasy, is troubling because “by leaving her tapes behind, Hannah is able to ‘live on’ after suicide […] For readers contemplating suicide themselves, it offers an unrealistic message that they can somehow remain present after suicide and even get revenge on the ones who have hurt them” (Hendrickson 15). The second point, that Hannah’s suicide ultimately leads Clay to live a better life, is equally as damaging (Hendrickson 16). By the end of the book, Clay
observes, “A flood of emotion rushes into me. Pain and anger. Sadness and pity. But most surprising of all, hope” (Asher 288). This once again validates Hannah’s suicide. By framing Hannah’s suicide as merely a dramatic device to transition Clay into his future, the ending risks the validation of suicide and demonstrates how someone’s choice to end their own life can become the springboard to someone else’s success story. I deliberately addressed this aspect in “And We Run,” when Candice expresses her frustration about how people talk about death. She tells Seth, “Like you know how people always come up with memorials for people after they’re dead? Or prizes or scholarships or causes? It’s like that. I don’t want his death to mean something. I don’t want him to be a cautionary tale. I want his life to mean something.”

There are several important points I hope to convey within “And We Run.” Mostly I did not want to romanticize death or suicide. I wanted to focus on how devastating it is to lose someone, especially when that person is young, and I wanted to dissect the impact a death could have on those who are left behind. I did not want to write an afterschool special. I wanted to write an authentic depiction of loss. Too often, young adult novels tie everything up into a neat bow at the end of the story. This is done in Thirteen Reasons Why, when the tapes Hannah leaves behind literally solve the mystery of her suicide one chapter at a time. This is also done in Looking for Alaska, when the deciding clue of Alaska’s death is discovered right at the end of the novel. In making suicide or the cause of death the answer to a question, it becomes a defining characteristic of that character. Candice protests this very idea when she tells Seth, “you know, if it was intentional. That’s not all he was. It’s something that happened to him. It wasn’t – you can never really know all that someone is. And Colin was a lot more than that.”
I wanted “And We Run” to dwell in the non-answers. Seth never finds out if Colin did or did not deliberately drive off the road. In fact, Seth never even finds Colin’s body. I didn’t want this to be a mystery novel, at the end of which suicide emerges like the triumphant final answer. Yes, there are clues throughout to Colin’s mental state: he reveals through his journal that he self-harmed and writes “I am so tired,” something Candice later explains as one of the feelings that drove her to her own suicide attempt, and he was clearly withdrawn from his family, who had lost touch with who he was as a person long before his death. Ultimately, however, Seth’s obsessive search for who his brother was is left unsolved. The questions are unanswerable because Colin cannot speak from the other side of the grave.

Although this is a heavy and conceivably dismal take on death, I did not want to leave “And We Run” on an entirely hopeless note. The novel takes on the form of a long letter as Seth writes Colin in order to work out his grief and anger about Colin’s death. This letter ultimately ends as an anti-suicide note with Seth’s decision to accept Colin’s death and do his best to pursue a life without his brother, despite the immense difficulties that lie ahead. Seth writes, “I guess I’m going to stick it out, okay? In case you were worried. I don’t know if I really want to, right now. But I’m just going to stick around.” This ending was heavily inspired by the sentiments reflected at the end of Kazuo Ishiguro’s Never Let Me Go. Never Let Me Go is a novel that traces the lives of three young people, Kathy H., Ruth C., and Tommy D., as they struggle with the themes of embracing life, atonement, and accepting mortality. Seth reads Never Let Me Go’s final paragraph in “And We Run.” This paragraph is a moment of intense yearning and mourning, but also acceptance, when Kathy H. contemplates the loss of Tommy D.:
I half-closed my eyes and imagined this was the spot where everything I’d ever lost since my childhood had washed up, and I was now standing here in front of it, and if I waited long enough, a tiny figure would appear on the horizon across the field, and gradually get larger until I’d see it was Tommy, and he’d wave, maybe even call. The fantasy never got beyond that – I didn’t let it – and though the tears rolled down my face, I wasn’t sobbing or out of control. I just waited a bit, then turned back to the car, to drive off to wherever it was I was supposed to be. (Ishiguro 287-288)
Works Cited


