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I, Stephen

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I, Stephen

A senior thesis submitted to
The Department of
Humanities
College of Theology,
Arts & Sciences

In partial fulfillment of
the requirements for a
Bachelor of Arts degree
in English

by

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**Concordia University
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Abstract

I, Stephen is a memoir of the author's time at basic training for the United States Navy. The primary theme explored through this piece is death as a metaphor for change, with smaller themes of relationships, perception versus reality, freedom versus security, and courage. The journey begins with the author's first experience with near-death as an infant, then moving into his time in basic training which depicts the struggles with daily routines, interactions with officers, and physical ailments, ultimately leading to the author's departure and eventual attendance at Concordia University – Portland. Through the creative process of this memoir and research into other writers, the author undergoes an evolution where the old version of the author dies and begins the process of rebuilding into a stronger individual, ready to face new challenges ahead.

I, Stephen

By Stephen Kurtz Newhall

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Thank you to my parents Paul and Lupe and my sister Samantha, the three strongest people I know and without whom I wouldn't be here. I hope I make you all proud.

Lastly, I would like to thank all the men and women from the United States Navy who've shaped me into a stronger person. Names have been altered to protect privacy but know that your presence in my life has been invaluable.

Introduction

Everything is meant to come to an end, yet we don't know when or how this will happen. One day we could be sitting amongst our loved ones eating our favorite meal and the next we are lying in a box, buried six feet under the earth. It's a horrifying yet inevitable conclusion to our stories. Death, however, isn't only a physical event. Death is a metaphysical construct, a way to define the changes we go through in life and how we change into something new. It's a terrifying process, speaking from personal experience, but one that I recognized was stunting my growth as a human being. So, I decided to write about it, to face my demons head on. *I, Stephen* examines this process through stories about moments in my life and how I was destroyed and began the process of rebuilding myself into someone stronger.

The opening piece of my memoir, "The Prayer," goes back to several weeks after my birth and during my residency in a hospital for a coarctation of my aorta which the doctors had told my parents that I was going to die from. This piece is told from a future version of myself that embodies death and depicts my mother's prayer for my survival, an event which has followed me throughout my life. My memoir then jumps years into the future where I travel to Great Lakes, Illinois for basic training as part of my joining the United States Navy. This section is divided into five parts which run from my arrival to departure, detailing the struggles which took a physical and mental toll on me and served as a catalyst for the "death" of my former self who struggled with facing challenges and growing up. *I, Stephen* then ends with "Brave

New World,” which takes place years later during my first day at Concordia University – Portland. It is here where I have my first writing class where during a freewriting exercise, I flash back to the moment of my mother’s prayer, a moment which now signifies my readiness to start over in life.

Death is a mystery as big as the human brain itself. We try to understand something that we know is inevitable but is infinitely complex and something that isn’t meant to be understood. No matter how hard we try, death comes for us all. Many authors have touched upon death and how it can hurt us, but also changes our existence in unforeseeable ways. Such authors include Atul Gawande, Paul Kalanithi, John Green, Stephen Chbosky, Sherman Alexie, and Dante Alighieri. Each one of these writers have explored death through characters and environment, all trying to make sense of this phenomenon and how it shapes an individual.

The catalyst for creating this memoir came from watching a documentary about Dr. Atul Gawande’s *Being Mortal* which discusses medicine and the practice of the medical field when caring for terminally ill patients. I had read the book prior to watching the actual film, but I hadn’t gotten the full weight of its meaning until seeing it portrayed before my eyes. The film had a tremendous impact upon my mind and emotions, leading me to go back and re-read the book with a fresh set of eyes about how the author deals with death in the medical field. In the beginning parts of the book, Dr. Gawande directly acknowledges the inevitability of death for

everyone, yet how one must not give in until everything that can be done has been done:

“Decline remains our fate; death will someday come. But until that last backup system inside each of us fails, medical care can influence whether the path is steep and precipitate or more gradual, allowing longer preservation of that matter most in life. Most of us in medicine don’t think above this. We’re good at addressing specific, individual problems: colon cancer, high blood pressure, arthritic knees. Give us a disease and we can do something about it. But give us an elderly woman with high blood pressure, arthritic knees, and various other ailments besides – an elderly woman at risk of losing the life she enjoys – and we hardly know what to do and often only make matters worse.” (44)

Reading this passage and the rest of the book, I felt compelled to write about death. The impact it has upon lives is insurmountable and the fear of how it could affect or has affected my family made my heart race. I had planned on writing an analysis paper of how various authors have explored the phenomenon of death and how it impacts loved ones, yet I couldn’t shake the nagging feeling that there was something else I was seeking to explore.

After mentioning this book to my thesis advisor Dr. Ceiridwen Terrill and department chair Dr. Kimberly Knutsen, I was advised to read Dr. Paul Kalanithi’s *When Breath Becomes Air*, a memoir about how this prominent surgeon was diagnosed with Stage IV cancer and ultimately died from his disease. Like Dr. Gawande’s *Being Mortal*, Dr. Kalanithi presents medical terminology through various

cases and interactions with patients. What makes his accounting different is the personal experience with death, both in his interactions and through his own diagnosis. In Part 11 of his book, "Cease Not till Death," Dr. Kalanithi delves inward and expresses his emotions upon learning how drastically his life had changed:

"My life had been building potential, potential that would now go unrealized. I had planned to do so much, and I had come so close. I was physically debilitated, my imagined future and my personal identity collapsed, and I faced the same existential quandaries my patients faced. The lung cancer diagnosis was confirmed. My carefully planned and hard-won future no longer existed. Death, so familiar to me in my work, was now paying a personal visit. Here we were, finally face-to-face, and yet nothing about it seemed recognizable." (120-121)

Seeing how Dr. Kalanithi explored his personal struggle with death through his occupation and diagnosis, I realized that I no longer wanted to write an analysis of writers who have examined death through their work. Instead, I wanted to tell my own story. I have experienced death before with near-death experiences and loss of loved ones, but, none of them seemed to fit. Then it dawned on me. There was one time where I had died. Not a physical death, but a death of self, where I had been changed so irreversibly and placed on a whole new path in life. This was my time in basic training, my first attempt to try something new that was my plan. There, I was destroyed, torn apart and what came out of it was someone who ultimately could move forward in life, facing new challenges to come.

To accomplish the task of writing about my time in basic training as a “death of self,” I began looking into other authors who portrayed death as a motivating factor for change in the lives of their characters. One such piece that I read and adapted is John Green’s *The Fault in Our Stars* which explores impending death and tragic loss through the eyes of a teenage girl named Hazel Grace Lancaster who suffers from cancer. In the beginning, Hazel Grace describes her cancer support group, detailing how the director Patrick kept discussing about Jesus and the struggles which everyone has undergone with their cancers (4-5). Like Hazel Grace, my journey depicts how the Naval officers would “depart their information” upon the recruits which served to break my spirit down, not unlike how Hazel Grace must have felt in her time with the support group. In *I, Stephen*, the section “It All Falls Down” presents how a recruit named Mitchell passed out after a very stressful day and the conflict which erupted due to the hardships we had to endure (62). Although in no way a romantic relationship like Hazel Grace’s romance with Augustus, his death and Mitchell’s passing out are intended to parallel one another and serve as a catalyst for change in our lives. The internal dialogue featured in the novel is something which I’ve attempted to capture by addressing the audience in the present tense, bringing them into my tale with a first-person perspective to further experience the tension behind the tale.

The use of other characters and their voices was an element which I focused on building. Each character presented and depicted speaking had a hand in the experiences I’ve undergone, breaking down who I used to be and helping build who I

am today. In Sherman Alexie's *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* provides characters whom all provide a strong foundation for Junior as he enters a new environment when attending school at Rearden. Many characters had an impact upon Junior's journey at Rearden, much like the people I met while in basic training. One such character is Coach, who adopts a mentor, almost parental relationship with Junior, such as during a basketball game where their basketball team had to face off against another team from Junior's former school:

"It's okay," Coach said to me, but he was talking to the whole team. "If you care about something enough, it's going to make you cry. But you have to use it. Use your tears. Use your pain. Use your fear. Get mad, Arnold, get mad." (144)

Like Junior, I had a prominent figure who oversaw me and the other recruits: Petty Officer Holt. Although tough, he did provide a pillar of support when he could, being one of the few people who gave me some strength amidst the chaos of basic training. In addition, The Chaplain presented in "Crisis" also provides support, acknowledging like Coach to Junior how it's okay to break down and to have the strength to move forward despite the difficulties in life, "'Look, I get it. This life is difficult, and I commend you for coming here and giving your time to the service. Not many people would do so, and it takes a great amount of courage to do it. But it takes a greater amount of courage to say that enough is enough'" (53). Then there's Trixie, whom I met at the airport when I was leaving basic training. Although not a parental figure by any means, the discussion with another person who had undergone similar trials as myself was essential to my growth later in life. These

characters, along with my family, all depict how the presence of others can impact how one handles such a traumatic event as death, physical or metaphysical, and how it can impact others.

Imagery is also another element which plays heavily into *I, Stephen*, depicting the environment with concrete details to evoke emotion and tension throughout my memoir. For my piece, this action involves the use of people in the background as well as the actual setting to bring forth the emotional payoff through a combination of physical movement and natural elements, even if it's man-made structures. Dante Alighieri's *The Divine Comedy* makes use of graphic imagery which shifts from a nightmarish landscape to a mountain fraught with challenges before ending in a place of peace. In "Canto VI" of "Inferno," Dante describes his descent into the third circle of Hell and the nightmarish landscape:

I am in the Third Circle of the torments.
 Here to all time with neither pause nor change
 the frozen rain of Hell descends in torrents.
 Huge hailstones, dirty water, and black snow
 pour from the dismal air to putrefy
 the putrid slush that waits for them below. (54-55)

Using such imagery throughout *I, Stephen*, I create parallels between the hellish landscape and events at basic training, both through physical actions and location. The structure of *The Divine Comedy* also parallels with the structure of my memoir: "The Prayer" is the beginning of "the midway in our life's journey" from "Inferno"

(16). Parts One through parallels with the main plot of “Inferno” and my journey through “Hell.” “SEPS” and “Crossroads” parallel with “Purgatorio” and the beginning of my new path in life. Finally, “Brave New World” parallels with “Paradiso” and the new, better life I’ve found myself in.

Flashbacks and past references are a key factor to my memoir. Although not riddled with them, the use of the past in moments of internal conflict reveal the deeper meaning of my story and why I commit to the actions I perform and grow into the person I am today. Stephen Chbosky’s *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* depicts a young boy named Charlie entering a new school where he grows and becomes a relatively sociable individual while coming to terms with the abuse he suffered by his deceased aunt, a theme which permeates in each word to further emphasize the growth of the character. These references and interactions all serve a purpose: to live in the present, one must deal with the past to find their future. Charlie and I both undergo this trial, facing past issues which have long been buried within us. For Charlie, it was the abuse he suffered from his aunt and the repression of these events until his time in a mental institution (209-210). For me, it was my failure in school and not being able to complete basic training. Through interactions with key individuals and depicting the healing process, myself by crafting this memoir and Charlie writing his letters, parallels are established to present that we as people shouldn’t let these past traumas fester within us but accept it and move on with life.

Death is something that has always fascinated me. I think it's important to acknowledge the simple inevitability that everything will end. It's something we never want to face, yet it can be one of the most rewarding paths to undertake in one's life. I have had brushes with death which have shaped my character, physical and metaphysical, and I struggle with my past even now. Yet I wouldn't change a thing. We're all going to die, one way or another. We will all become stories told others as cautionary tales or as triumphant legacies. But why should we be afraid? Accept and embrace the fear and use it to conquer what's to come and move forward.

We're all going to die.

So, let's deal with it.

Together.

Ladies and gentlemen, this is my story...

The Prayer

Beep!

Beep!

I step into the room and take in the sights. Tubes and machinery fill the walls and corners like a morbid art gallery, in the center its masterpiece. A baby boy, wires stuck to and wrapping around his tiny frame, almost like he's caught in a blackberry bush and can't get out. The smell of antibiotics burns through my nostrils like a wildfire, uncontrollable and unmerciful. The beeping fills my ears, not with a symphony, but with a cacophony replaying for no reason but to fulfill its chilling purpose. Yet my eyes fall to the boy. He looks so helpless. Pale, small, and exposed to the world. He's fighting for his life. The scars on his body tell me that something bad happened, his entire being violated with knives, needles, and all manners of "medicine."

I have walked these halls for God knows how long. I have seen many people come and go, moving on with their lives or just passing away. Yet it's the children, the infants which pain me the most. So innocent and inexperienced to the pleasures and torments of life, now facing the dark road to come. Life isn't fair. Especially when an innocent child could be robbed of theirs so soon.

Especially when that person is you.

I lean towards the boy, my lips parting ways.

Then, I hear it.

"Please."

I turn and see a woman sitting near the boy. In her thirties given her complexion, yet she carries the world on her shoulders. Brown eyes filled with exhaustion and dread. An unbruised yet battered face that should belong to a heavyweight boxer in their twelfth round. Her hands clench together, struggling to stay still as if she's willing herself to remain calm. I look at her and see such horror, pain, and anger course through her like electricity within a wire. I kneel beside her and listen.

"Please, I'm begging you. Save my son," she clenches her hands pressed to her forehead as her body shakes back and forth.

I squat in front of her.

Beep!

"He's innocent. He has such a wonderful life to lead. He is my everything," her voice quakes, tremors reverberating through the air.

I lean forward.

Beep!

"My husband and I can't do this on my own anymore. We've tried everything," her shoulders heave up and down as words flow from her mouth. "So, I leave it to you to decide. If it's his time, then so be it. But I'm begging you to let him live. Let him live a wonderful life filled with joy and give him the chance to make a difference in the world. Let him live," her eyes shift up to the ceiling, staring into the blank void above.

I've heard people pray before. People bargaining, pleading for their loved ones to be saved only to be met with silence and uncertainty. This woman is no different

than everyone else, but I can't help but ponder. Could this child make a difference in the world? Does he deserve to live a happy life? I stand up and look at the boy again. He's a blank slate, a canvas yet to be filled with colors and words.

There's no telling what he may become.

Beep!

Soon enough, doctors come into the room, and guide the grieving mother out. I watch her leave before returning to the boy. I lean in close and whisper.

"You don't get to die today."

I place my hand on the container and smile before exiting the room and return to my journey through the halls and to the next room.

I walk these halls every day, visiting people and bearing witness to their journey's end. I watch them find peace, knowing the world will keep turning once they're gone. But sometimes, I like to gamble. Sometimes, taking a chance on someone is fun.

Maybe this boy will turn out all right.

I don't know.

I'm looking forward to finding out.

Part One

Leaving on a Jet Plane...Well, Not a Jet Plane, But Close Enough

“Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen! We will begin boarding now. Please come forward when your seating section is called. Thank you and enjoy your day!”

As we sit and wait for the plane to call my section, my mom and dad, Paul and Lupe, hold hands, the former trying to keep the latter calm. The fear seeps out of her skin and spreads across the gate. Everyone can feel it. I watch her ramble on about being safe and watching out for myself, “Make sure that you don’t do anything that will get you in trouble. You’re going to be around a lot of strangers and not all of them will be good.”

“I know, Mom,” my voice heavy with frustration and fear. I’d be lying if I say that I’m not nervous too.

Mom releases Dad’s hand and leans forward. You can always tell when she tries to play tough but is scared shitless by how much she leans forward while sitting down. Right now? The hunchback she has would put Quasimodo to shame. I can’t blame her. “And make sure that if there’s ever a problem that you report it right away. Don’t keep things hidden from the...officers? I’m sure you’d get in trouble if you do,” she says, her hands waiving in front of her as always when she talks.

I breathe, holding back the snide retort hiding in my throat, “I know, Mom. I’ll be fine.” Based on the forehead wrinkles and eyes closing for a brief second, I know she doesn’t buy it. We don’t have much time to talk about it anymore as a flight attendant announces that the plane is ready for boarding. I get up and hug Dad first,

his embrace tighter than normal as he whispers, "Be safe and just give it your all. You're going to be fine."

I smile as he releases me into Mom's arms. I don't pay attention to what she says. I'm sure there's a mixture of phrases like, "I love you, I'm going to be thinking of you every day, God be with you," and many more. What I do notice is her trembling. Since I told her I joined the Navy, she tried to be strong for me. She knew I set my mind towards this, that I believe this is the best path for all of us. Yet time made her nervous for my safety. I can understand her fear, but there's no changing it now. I must do this. This isn't out of love for my country. I'm doing this because it's going to turn my life around and help me build a stable future, with a solid education and the skills to survive in the world. I'm doing this for my parents and sister, to make them proud of me and my accomplishments. I'm doing this for myself, to prove that I can succeed.

I release myself from Mom's embrace and move towards the gate with the rest of my fellow recruits. I look back one more time at my parents with a smile on my face. They both wave to me, smiles matching my own. We're all afraid of what comes next, but I know this is going to be the best move for all of us. I turn back around and continue down the boarding hall for the plane, quickly finding my seat as I close my eyes and take a deep breath.

As I snap my seatbelt into place, my left arm begins to tingle. I ignore it, paying attention to the clouds rolling in the sky as the plane lifts off towards my future.

Here we go.

The Arrival

It's pitch black outside, all light consumed by the cold dark void. Rain pelts the airport's metal body, a thousand war drums thundering in perfect synchronization. We wander off the plane and get lost in Chicago O'Hare airport within three minutes. Up and down escalators and stairs, back and forth along moving pathways. Wet heat pours through the walls and caresses our skin, beckoning sweat to escape its fleshy prison. We trek across the airport's massive structure, trying to find our destination. The worse part of it all? Everyone's looking to me for guidance. Why? Because I'm the oldest. I guess being twenty-five makes you an expert in knowing how to navigate a maze.

Twenty minutes pass before we find our fellow recruits. A hundred young men and women sit in wait for our buses, filling an entire corridor from corner to corner, not an inch of the floor viewable from the asses blanketing it. Petty officers stand at parade rest, staring down at us like gargoyles on a cathedral.

One of them sees us.

"What the fuck do you think you're all doing? Why aren't you sitting down like the rest of you little shits?" One of us, a recruit named Allen, tries to respond, but the petty officer cuts him off and continues to scream.

"Get. On. The. Ground. NOW!"

We take our seats, staring at each other with fear glimmering from our pupils. My fingers intertwine with each other and come loose after a second or two, my

heels tap the ground as I sit cross-legged on the tile floor. There are no clocks around, so time is irrelevant, but my group and forty other recruits are soon called to get on our bus “right fucking now,” as another red-faced sailor put it. Arms and words fly like birds as we scuttle into the tin can, taking off for our destination.

There is nothing but noise. Sticking my fingers in my ears can’t stop it. The constant hooting and hollering from the recruits who are excited to be here. I get an evil glare from a young, Latino petty officer whenever I try to plug my ears, coincidentally when he speaks.

“When you arrive, you’ll be put into groups for processing. You’ll get a chance to call home for a couple of minutes before going on to get your sweats and toiletries. Then you’ll be placed into your divisions and sent to your compartments. Any questions?” Hands shoot up in the air as questions begin flying out of everyone’s mouths.

“When do we get our officers?”

“How often can we call home?”

“How long have you been in the Navy?”

“Do we get to see women?”

I stare out the bus window into the night sky, my heart thundering hard, my chest aching. My fingers intertwine with each other as I try to steady myself. First my pinkies.

Then my ring fingers.

One by one until my thumbs dance around each other, their own waltz playing out above my index fingers. I still believe this is the best course of action, so I just sit in my little corner on the bus, alone in the noise and dark.

“You will now piss into the container and hand it in for testing. Should you test positive for any illegal substances, you will be processed out of the base until proper action can be determined.”

I walk up to a urinal, plastic cup in hand, a gift from an old petty officer stationed at the back of the restroom, pruned and smelling of menthols. I stand there for about three minutes before it dawns on me: I can't pee. My body goes still, my skin tingling. I zip my pants back up and turn to “Smelly Prune” and say, “Uh, petty officer? I, uh, can't go.”

“Smelly Prune” sighs and guides me into a classroom, chalkboard at the front and filled with seven rows of desks, five in each one. Recruits walk in a circle around the room. He hands me a bottle of water and just says, “Drink this.”

I open the bottle and down the liquid as quick as I can. Before I can put the bottle down, the petty officer rips it from my hand and hands me another, nodding to it.

I down the second bottle.

Then comes a third.

Then a fourth. One after another until “Smelly Prune” snatches the seventh one.
“Now, walk around the room until you have to piss.”

All I get is a cold stare. I feel that if I were to turn him down, he would start spitting in my face and blow out my ear drums. So, I join the other recruits in walking around the room. Lap after lap, I drudge onward as petty officers stare at me, expecting for a puddle to form in my crotch. After five minutes, I’m handed another water bottle by “Smelly Prune.” I drink it down and continue walking.

Then comes another lap, another bottle.

Then another.

Time swims on and on until finally, my bladder screams. I step out of the line and the petty officer leads me back to the urinal. Almost immediately, I fill the cup to its rim, quickly placing it on the porcelain urinal before finishing off all the remaining fluid inside me.

“Take your sample and go into the next room. Wait there for further instructions.”

I’m in an open room where a stout recruit wearing round glasses is holding a sample cup like mine. I stare for a moment.

“Well are you just going to stand there like an idiot? Sit down and wait! And don’t let the cup touch the floor,” a pale petty officer shouts from the other side of the room.

Is he serious?

I sit on the cold floor next to the recruit, our eyes meeting for only a moment. There's five other petty officers behind desks in front of us, pens striking paper with purpose, but no one calls us up for two hours. The cup warms my hand, a sweaty coat of water covers my skin and sends a shiver along my arm. I alternate the cup between my hands, only to find that putrid feel to envelop my body. I'm swimming in my own bile, little worms crawling along my skins and shivers running around and through my bones.

"Listen up! You'll all now be divided into your compartments! When we tell you to move, you move!"

As soon as the chief says this, groups of seventy start to march off. I gulp, praying to whatever may be listening that I don't get stuck with a bunch of imbeciles. Closer and closer, the chief gets to us. One of the recruits moves without permission.

Big mistake.

"The fuck you think you're doing, boy? Are you disobeying a direct order? I should throw you back to whatever shithole you came from! Do you see any other recruits moving without my say so? No! Now get the fuck back in line!"

The recruit bows his head and moves back into formation; he joins me and others in marching through the dark stone hallways. We come upon a small room filled with clothes, toiletries, and cardboard boxes.

“You will change into your sweats and put everything into the boxes! Afterwards, you will call home and let your families know you’re safe. Notify them you won’t be able to call again until permitted to do so! Now get to it,” a female petty officer shouts. I strip out of my t-shirt and jeans, replacing them with a yellow pee-colored shirt with the word “Navy” over my heart and blue sweatpants and place them in a box to be sent home. My hand slows as I write my address, a vice holding my joints in place. I ignore it and finish writing my address before rubbing it gently, the soreness burning my left hand like a flat iron. I reach for my phone and dial home. Only one ring goes off before Mom answers it.

“Hi honey, are you okay? I’ve been worried.”

“I’m fine, Mom. We’re about to head to our compartments. I won’t be able to call for a while, but I wanted you to know that I’m safe and will try to call when I can,” I whisper, a tightness forming in my throat.

Mom snuffles, “Okay, honey. Be safe and please try to call when you can. I love you, Sweetheart.”

“Alright! Hang up your phones and get moving,” the female petty officer shouts from the door.

“I love you too, Mom.”

Click.

“Place your belongings into the compartments under your mattresses and get to bed! You got shit to do tomorrow! So, lights out!”

Boom!

As soon as the door closes, chaos ensues. Everyone fights for a bed. I find a bunk with another recruit named Wong, him gladly giving me the bottom bunk. I toss my things into the compartment underneath the mattress, before climbing on top and laying down. A few minutes pass before everyone gets settled and start dozing off. I close my eyes, thankful for the day to be over and hope that tomorrow will be better after a good night’s sleep.

Bfft! The sounds echo, bouncing off the walls like a tennis ball. Bfft! Poof! Peeet! My nose twitches. I thought so.

Everyone is farting.

“Great,” I murmur to myself, flipping over to smother my face in the pillow.

My left arm begins to tingle again.

Stop it.

Interlude #1

In the beginning, I had thought I was making the right decision by joining the Navy, so confident in my decision and even though I was scared, I felt I was making the right move in life. My mother and father have always prayed for me to succeed in life and by becoming a part of something bigger, I felt I would make them proud. What I didn't know at the time was that what you may think is good isn't at all what you expect. Sometimes, the decisions you make can be so life-altering that you don't know how to react in the beginning. You just go with it and see what happens, hoping to God that you find yourself on your own two feet and in the place you were hoping to be when you first started walking on this path.

Part Two

Here Comes the Boom...Literally

“Dude, that was a big ass shit!”

Living with seventy-five guys at once SUCKS!

Farting all the time? It's to the point where we've become synchronized.

Showering together? I have no problem with other guys, but I've seen more penises than I ever wanted to in my whole life. And does no one know how to clean after themselves? The toilet bowls have yellow rings around them.

Hearing some of the most ridiculous stories ever? I've heard some of my friends in the past tell some crazy tales, but I'm sick of hearing guys talk about their sexual conquests.

There are some guys whom I've gotten to know that aren't complete tools. There's Allen. We first met when we departed from Portland for Great Lakes. His wife and my mom hit it off instantly. We hadn't gotten the chance to know each other at first, what with being bitched at by petty officers every day for not getting into formation quick enough or talking in the mess hall while eating. Still, once we got a chance to talk, we hit it off quite well. After all, we're stuck in the same boat together.

The pun isn't intended.

My bunkmate Wong is a cool cat. Taller than me by a couple of inches, this guy knows how to maintain his calm. I don't know if this has anything to do with the perpetual stoned look on his face, but he's handling himself far better than I am.

Rogers is another recruit whom I departed Portland with and gotten to know. Shorter than me by a few inches, he makes up for it with a large personality. Fire literally pours from his eyes as he takes in a challenge with more zest than spice on a chicken breast. Cordial to a fault, you'd think he's a bit of a kiss ass when he's around the petty officers and all the higher-ups here at Great Lakes, but no. He cares about what they have to say. I mean, I care too, but not enough to where I would get on my knees and beg for them to love me. They're all good guys.

It's still not home, though.

They're not my family.

I wonder how they're getting on without me. Knowing my sister Samantha, she's probably busy planning her life back in Arizona. Dad is probably slaving away at work as always. He's a smart guy, but I know he's miserable. It's Mom who I worry about the most. I can see her clear as water. Her tiny frame shuddering with fear at not knowing how I'm doing. Shouting at Dad, saying that it's all his fault that I'm gone. It's not and I think she knows that. She just gets angry and takes it out on him sometimes, especially when it has to do with my sister and I. That's who Mom is. Fire personified. That worries me, though. She lives through my sister and I. We're extensions of her very soul.

Now, I'm gone, just like my sister.

Will her fire go out without me there?

“Alright, recruits! Get in front of your bunks! Do it now,” a petty officer roars as she walks through the compartment door. In an instant, the recruits bolt to their bunks, dropping anything they’re holding onto to the ground. I stand like a statue with Wong, both of us quickly glancing at each other before returning our gazes to the short woman in front of us.

From the tone of her voice, a single word pops into my head.

Bitch.

Five feet, four inches. Her skin a pasty white, not unlike the gunk inside of an Elmer’s glue bottle. A dark blue/black pattern uniform, ironed out that you would need a magnifying glass to find a wrinkle. Hair brown as the bark on a tree, pulled straight back into a stubbed ponytail. I wonder if her hair being so tight is why she’s such a bitch. My eyes wander over her body as they finally land on her name printed in black across her left breast.

Greer.

“Listen up! I’m Petty Officer Greer. I’ll be one of your RDCs for the next few weeks as you go through training here. You will do everything I say and if you have a question about it, then I suggest you shut your pie holes and keep your questions to yourselves until we tell you to speak up and ask!”

We?

As Greer finishes her sentence, two more people walk in. The first is another woman, not much taller than Greer with a similar pristine uniform and tight

ponytail. Wrinkles give away the lovers, trials, happiness, and sorrow she's experienced throughout her life. Each freckle is a scar, branding her with all that she's known and felt. On her left breast is a name, gold instead of black.

Banks.

The second is a tall black man. I need to crane my head upward to look at the dark enormities that are his eyes, through his glasses. Like his compatriots, his uniform is immaculate. He carries himself with poise and strength, yet different from Greer and Banks. He's quiet, a silent power radiating from him in waves. Just the way his jaw tightens tells this isn't his first rodeo. And like the women, a name is stitched on his left breast, black like Greer's.

Holt.

Holt steps forward and bellows, "Good morning! My name is Petty Officer Holt. You can call me that or 'Petty Officer,' but never just Holt. I will be one of your RDCs and it's my job to ensure that you're ready for active service within the next eight weeks. For the time that you're here, you will listen to our direct orders and we will report back to Senior Chief Banks." His eyes fall on the other woman next to him, all eyes from us recruits now gazing upon the real person in charge.

Senior Chief Banks steps forward, the two petty officers now standing behind her, and begins waiving her hands, "You will all pack your belongings and head over to your ship where you will reside in your division unit, Room 196. Petty Officers Holt and Greer will be your direct leaders, so my orders will come through them. And no, it's not an actual ship. That's just what we call the buildings. Now, get to it!"

A moment later, one of us steps forward. I remember him mentioning his name once before: Ramirez. A Spanish guy, roughly the same height as Rogers, yet with big brown eyes and arms that would make Popeye jealous. Seriously, this guy must have hit the gym back home seven days a week. He stands to attention again and shouts, "Yes, Senior Chief!"

And here I thought Rogers was a kissass.

As soon as Ramirez finishes his sentence, everyone moves; Holt and Greer move into an office within our room while Banks heads out of our compartment and into the one across the hall. We grab our duffel bags and stuff them with our clothes and toiletries. They're not that many, so I think there will be more than enough room. But as I stuff my boots into the bag, Petty Officer Holt shouts, "Don't forget to stuff your blankets and pillows in there! You'll need those too!"

Fuck.

"What the fuck do you think you're doing? You're holding up everyone! Is that what you want? Are you here to make everyone fail?"

"I, uh..." I stutter, my eyes still adjusting to the sun's light. Greer doesn't even stop, "Don't speak unless we tell you to! Everyone, get back into formation!"

Rogers looks at me with a glance that says, "I'm sorry." Ramirez, on the other hand, just looks pissed. I look ahead and see Allen glancing back, the same stare of

sympathy on his face as Rogers has. Wong secretly bumps my shoulder with his, snapping me a little bit out of my funk. Holt is staring at me, his eyes boring into my head again.

Stop doing that.

The sun beats down on us as Greer resets the formation, cracking across our backs like a rawhide whip. Sweat streaks down my cheeks and my shoulders sag under the weight of my duffel bag. I shift it to my hands as some other recruits are doing in front of me, but in a minute, my arm begins to strain under the weight, all thanks to the sun bearing down upon my fellow recruits and me.

Ten minutes later, we're off again. Everyone tries to march at the same pace.

Left foot, right foot.

Left foot, right foot.

On and on, we march. The sun continues to beat down on us, heat summoning sweat through our clothes. My hands and shoulders take turns carrying my bag, but there are times where I almost drop it. Holt and Greer say we're going to our "ship," but I think we're being marched to the depths of Hell. It's hot enough, that's for sure.

I stare out amongst the landscape. A sea of green and gray spread across the earth, no clear end in sight. Tall brick buildings stand in testament to the Navy, men and women flooding in and out, conversing with each other or staring at recruits like myself. A few officers take note of us as we pass by, cataloging every inch of our

beings. My eyes travel away from the officers and upwards, drinking in the blue sky above.

Beautiful.

“Alright, now we’re going to head to our compartment: Room 196. Once we get there, you’ll be paired off with your bunkmate. You are to not speak to anyone else in the building. Just go to the compartment and await further instructions. Get to it!”

It takes some effort, but the recruits and I pour into the building and ascend the stairs to the third floor where we find Room 196. I dash for the nearest bunk to the bathroom; I drink a lot of water, so a bathroom nearby is a blessing. My eyes wander as I lean on the bunk. There’s nothing on the blue stone walls. The windows are glossed over as if ice is blanketing them. A sea of tile runs across the floor, foot tracks still coating it from the room’s previous tenants. Light in the room isn’t as bright as it is outside, but the change in tone stings my eyes like chlorine water. I sniff the air and yack.

I think someone used these bathrooms not too long ago.

I try to catch my breath as Allen and Wong stride over, equally exhausted and sweaty from our long trek. “So, how do you think we’ll get our bunkmates?” Wong asks, hands at his hips as he tries to stand up straight.

Allen pants, “Maybe they’ll let us choose.”

I chuckle, "I don't think that's going to happen."

Holt and Greer soon enter the room, the former bellowing, "Alright, before anyone gets settled in, we're going to pair you off with a bunkmate!"

I hate being right.

One by one, we're paired off. I'm stuck with a blond beanstalk called Banks while Allen is paired with Wong. Soon, we're all standing side-by-side with our bunkmates as Greer screams, "You will now put all your belongings away neatly and we'll come to inspect them later!" She then ducks into the office near the room entrance, Holt following as he taunts, "Once we're done with that, the real fun begins."

I kneel in front of the lower bunk, Banks taking the top one, and begin piecing together the little compartment that will be my world for the next couple of months. I don't talk to my bunkmate, staying focused on the task at hand. Too many things are running through my head. I have "friends" here, but now they're on the other side of the room.

I'm alone now, no one near to help me.

My left arm begins to tingle. My chest begins to ache.

I rub my arm and breathe slowly.

I can do this.

Roll Call

All week, Holt and Greer watch us like hawks, pushing us through intensive training to see how much pressure we can handle. One day, we perform “killers,” or as I like to call them “squats on steroids.” We perform a squat down, then kick out our legs in three different directions before doing a push up and then popping back up to attention.

Sounds easy, no? Not when you must do it THIRTY times in a row at different speeds. And if you can't keep up, you just do them again and again until you get it right.

You can call me Gumby now.

It's not until a few days after that when I realize that the training is to see which roles we're best suited for. Ramirez, the ultimate kissass that he is, is assigned as the RPOC, the leader of our unit. That's fine. I'd rather clean toilets than lead. Soon after, everyone gets a role:

Port Watch: Sanchez.

Starboard Watch: Bing.

Yeoman: Martin.

Allen is assigned to “Ship Watch,” standing guard at the main entrance to the building and monitor all the comings and goings. I never see him anymore now that he's doing that. Rogers is assigned to “Head Crew,” where the guys are to clean the

bathrooms from top to bottom. To be honest, I thought Rogers would be the RPOC, but I suppose Ramirez just knows how to suck up the right way.

Not that he's not a good recruit, mind you. I just think he's sucks up to people higher up than him. It must be a default setting for him.

Wong and I are assigned to Port and Starboard Watch. It's not horrible. All you gotta do is just stand there and watch for intruders. What sucks is the night watch. One time, I had to force another recruit named Oliver out of bed so that he could take over my spot, something he should have done TWENTY MINUTES AGO! Then there's the off chance that a petty officer may come in to check on your compartment and its log. If even a single note is missed? Well...damn.

"Left, right, left, right, LEFT!"

"Next!"

Recruit after recruit goes to try to fill the role of AROC, our second-in-command and cadence caller. No one has been able to get it so far. I'm standing watch near the entrance of the compartment, Greer in the adjacent office, when a recruit named King tries it once, but he's quiet as a church mouse.

Rogers gives it a go too. He's loud enough, for sure. His voice? As Holt puts it, it sounds like a grinder against a rock and can't keep the proper melody.

Another recruit whose name I can't remember tries as well. He's got the volume, but every time he says left and right, you can hear a hitch in his voice. Holt even gets in his face about it, "Stop fucking doing that! We're going to be marching in front of the entire base for the next few weeks and when your families come to see you all graduate! You want to embarrass your fellow recruits? Is that what you want?"

The guy looks like he's going to cry.

Then comes Castus, a burly, bald guy who makes me think of a slightly taller Ramirez, but without the stick up his ass. In the few interactions I've had with him, he's always been a nice dude. Holt looks impatient as he takes the stage; if Castus fails, I suspect there will be killers and wall-sits in our near future. Ramirez stands next to him as he prepares for Castus' beat, Holt eyes stabbing at them. Greer leaves her office to join Holt, a gleeful look on her eye. She thinks Castus is going to fail.

Bitch.

Holt straightens his glasses, arms crossing over his chest, "Go."

"Left, right, left, right, a left! Left, right, left, right, left, right, a left!"

I turn around for a minute, breaking protocol to drink in the voice of an angel. My feet tap along with his tune as everyone in the compartment begins to smile and march along to the beat. Even Holt and Greer smile! This is the first time I've seen that. Pretty soon, the whole compartment erupts into a party, everyone marching along to Castus' voice while completing their tasks, whether it be cleaning the bathrooms or washing the windows.

I guess we found our AROC.

“So, recruit. What do you think of your shipmate?”

I stare ahead towards the door, afraid to look the man in the eye for fear that I'll spontaneously combust, “I think he's awesome, Petty Officer. Better than anyone else, anyways.”

“You're right on that part. So why didn't you try out?”

I can't help but look at the man now. His eyes stay fixed on me but aren't like swords stabbing into my brain. No, it's different this time around. He looks sad. No, disappointed is the word. I gulp, “I can't really sing, Petty Officer. That and I don't like to stand out, I guess.”

Holt nods, “I see. You know, when I yell at you all or make you exercise until your bones are about to break, I don't do it to punish you all. I do it to make you stronger and take on the challenge. If you can't do that, then I don't know how to help you.”

Now I'm staring at him, my eyes boring into him as his have so many times already. This man isn't who I thought he was. I'm not talking to the hardass I've come to know over the past two weeks. No, this man is completely different. He's letting a wall down. Or just showing a crack, I guess. Either way, he's different now.

“Just remember that and keep trying. Believe it or not, Greer and I are here to help,” he says as he walks back into the office. I stare towards the compartment entrance, Castus continuing to sing in the background as everyone continues with

their tasks in intense euphoria. I, however, pay no attention to any of it. I can't help but repeat Holt's words in my head. He sounds, for a moment like my father. He tried to make me understand why he and Mom would always push me, but I didn't understand.

I still don't.

"Let me see that log!"

I snap back to reality when Holt and Bing come up to my position and look over the log. As Bing talks to recruits Wilson and Bloom, Holt faces me again and says, "Go wash up while you have a chance." He then turns to the rest of the compartment, "Lights out in thirty minutes! If you haven't had a chance to shower today, do so now!"

I run to my bunk and pull out a shirt, a pair of shorts, socks, underwear, and sneakers before bolting to the shower on the far side of the compartment; it's bigger and less people use it. I strip down and jump into the already hot water, letting the blistering liquid run all over my skin, completely ignorant to the other penises around me. I keep repeating Holt's and my father's words in my head. They want me to succeed. But I don't know how.

My left arm begins to tingle. My chest begins to ache.

I clutch my chest and close my eyes, drowning myself in the hot water.

Cracked

Today's the day. Today, we get to call home. I've been waiting for this day for so long. I can't wait to tell Mom and Dad that I'm still here, that I haven't cracked yet. I get a chance to talk with Allen for a brief second before we head to the recreational center on base where the phones are and there's nothing that can stop his smile. "So, you excited to talk to your wife again?" I ask, my skin buzzing with energy.

"Dude, you have no idea. I just want to see her again so bad, but I guess this'll have to do for now," Allen recites, jumping up and down as we head into line.

"How long do you think it'll be until we get to call our families again?"

Allen smiles, "I hope soon. I don't know if I can go too long without talking to my wife or folks again." I nod in agreement. I would give anything to see them.

I would give anything to be home.

What am I going to say to them? Should I tell them about the fun night where Castus became AROC? Or maybe about the nights where I've had to keep watch over the entire compartment, just standing like a statue in the dark? Thought after thought flip like a gymnast and I have no idea what to say to them. What can I say?

“You have ten minutes. No leaving the premises and no buying any food or drinks. Anything we find will be considered contraband and disciplined accordingly. Now, call home.”

I find an empty booth and slide my prepaid card down its receiver. I pick up the black phone and dial the numbers for my house. One ring. Then another. On the third, I hear her voice.

Mom.

“Hi, honey! Oh my God, I’ve missed you so much. Are you okay? How’s training?”

I can’t speak.

“Hello? Are you there?”

My voice cracks.

“Hello?”

My voice cracks again.

“Hi, Mom.”

I can’t hold it in anymore.

In an instant, the tears rush from my eyes. I cry and cry, the tears never faltering. All the hell I’ve endured erupts to the surface as I wail and moan, my cries grazing throughout the building. Mom waits as I compose myself. Three minutes pass before I can speak again.

She sniffles, “Oh, Sweetheart. It’s okay. Tell me what’s been going on.”

So, I tell her. I talk about the late nights standing in the dark while monitoring the entire compartment. I tell her about the dirty bathrooms and laundry, how my skin crawls when I must touch dirty tighty whities. I tell her about the killers and other exercises. Holt and Greer are the stars of my stories, how the former is a hardass and the latter is a bitch. I unload about everything.

Well, except for the tingling in my left arm and my chest aching.

Mom breathes inward, her voice shaking, "Listen, Sweetheart. I know this is tough and I can't begin to say how much I miss you, how much we all miss you. Just keep your head down and do what you're told. Everything will be fine. Oh, your father wants to talk to you. Hold on."

As Mom reaches for Dad, I breathe a little more steadily. This is as hard on her as it is for me. I know what she wants me to come home. She won't say it aloud, but it's Mom.

I focus back on the call when Dad joins in, "Hey, Poppy! How are you? Everything okay?"

I wipe my eyes and breathe, "I'm good, Dad. Just a lot of stuff going right now."

I run through everything that I told Mom while Dad listens, "Well, I'm sure it'll get better. The officers only try to break you down, so you can build yourself back up into what the Navy wants."

Shut up, Dad.

"Yeah, I hope you're right."

“Listen, I want to tell you something. I just started a new job. I don’t think I’m going to be able to make it to your graduation,” Dad murmurs, now quiet as a sloth.

What.

The.

Fuck?

My mind flares as I try to think of something to say, but he beats me to it, “Your mother will be coming, so all you need to do is tell us when it is. But I can’t come. I’m sorry, Poppy. The job is so new, and I can’t take any time off yet. I’m sure you’ll do fantastic.”

I sniffle, “I understand, Dad. And thank you.”

I don’t understand.

Everyone’s a wreck when we get back to the compartment, faces stained with sorrow and loneliness. Holt and Greer shout orders left and right, everyone getting busy with cleaning. I rush into the laundry room, my fortress when I need to get away from it all. The laundry crew sees me but stays silent. I reach into a dryer as I start scrubbing, but I can only picture my mom and dad. I wish I could see them again. I wish they were here.

My left arm tingles. My chest aches.

I start coughing. I keep crying.

I can’t stop.

Romero

“Move it!”

“You idiot! Fucking move!”

“I swear to God, Romero!”

My muscles are screaming. Every twitch of my limbs, I’m met with a searing hot poker jabbing into my skin. The tile floor beneath me is covered in my sweat. Or is it someone else’s sweat? I don’t know anymore. We’re all on the ground, screaming in pain or at Romero running in the background, trying to get the supply closet all tidy.

The day starts out fine. Everyone just minds their own tasks, cleaning and shooting the breeze. In addition to my watch duties, I’ve started working on the laundry crew, joined by recruits Williams, Alonzo, and Trudeau. With Allen busy with Ship Watch, Rogers stuck in the bathrooms, and Wong and I on opposite watch shifts all the time, it’s nice to have people to talk to.

I’m cleaning out a dryer filled with lint, the masking tape quickly blanketed with dust and dead skin cells, when Williams asks Trudeau, “So, you came here because of your family. Right?”

I turn around and see Trudeau head first in a washer, the machine vibrating from the active washers next to it. He dives further into the machine and grunts, “Yeah. Money’s kinda tight at home and Dad wants me to go out and get a job. So, here I am.”

Alonzo peeks out of the storage closet where all the dirty clothes are, nodding in response to Trudeau's answer. "That's why I'm here. My wife and I are planning to start a family in the future. I figure this is a great way to secure that. Plus, if I must travel, she can too if we get military housing."

I look at these two guys and my heart begins to quicken. I left home because I wasn't cutting it in school. I hadn't wanted to go to school right away, but Mom insisted that I go. I still remember that first day at Clark College.

It was a nightmare. I was not ready.

"Everyone, get in formation! NOW!"

In record speed, I bolt to my bunk and get into my yellow t-shirt, shorts, and sneakers, joining my fellow recruits in the center of our compartment. Holt and Greer stand front and center, Ramirez joining them as well. I gulp as Holt steps forward, his eyes blazing with fury and a little mischievousness, "So, it's time for some intensive training! You'll keep going until Romero fixes the cleaning closet the way Greer and I want it! If anyone touches the ground with their knees, then we'll just keep going! Now, begin!"

For twenty minutes, we do killers, push-ups, and squats. The only recruits, whose names I don't recall, exempt from this punishment are the ones who are sick.

My knees, shoulders, and elbows pop with every move. Everyone around me is in pain. They're hurt.

Confused.

Angry.

"Legs straight, Newhall! If you don't do this right, then we're gonna keep going even if Romero gets done!"

Why do we have to suffer for Romero's mistake? As we move from exercise to exercise, he's running in the background, moving supplies in and out of the room as he mops, sweeps, and dusts the small closet. It's a tiny room, but harder to clean than it appears to be. Holt always gets mad when even the slightest thing is out of place. I look at Romero, this short tan kid who's a Nuke. He's supposed to be one of the smartest guys in the compartment, but with his eyes wide and moving back and forth as if he's lost in the woods, he looks more like an idiot.

I've never wanted to kill anyone, but in this moment, I want to strangle him.

I straighten my legs again, the fire immediately returning to them. I look up and see Ramirez. He's in as much pain as we all are, but he doesn't make much of a sound. I want to get up and kick him to the ground. How dare he try to show off? He's the one in charge of us, yet he never checks on our work. He should have helped Romero with the closet. Yet, he's here with the rest of us. Holt always says that when one person fails, we all fail. I can understand that line of thinking. It's just like my mom and Samantha. If she can succeed, then so can I.

“Everyone, stop!”

I’m gasping for air, my chest ready to explode from the sudden loss of oxygen. I force myself to sit up as Holt stares down at us. All I can feel is hate. How can he make us do all that exercise? How can he punish us for someone else’s mistake? Yes, we’re a team, but I didn’t do anything! Why do I have to suffer? It’s just like school all over again, that fear. I don’t want this, this pain again.

“You’ll all be happy to know that Romero finally finished cleaning the supply closet. And none of you touched the ground. But while you all succeeded, understand what will happen if just one of you screws up again. If one fails, everyone will be punished for it. Understand?”

“Yes, Petty Officer!” I join in on the fun but can’t stop gasping for air and staring at the man with hate. Holt catches my eyes and maintains contact for a moment. He knows that I’m upset, but he doesn’t seem to care. He’s on a mission and no one is going to stop him. “Everyone, back into your uniforms and line up for lunch. Sick people in their own line,” he says, not even looking at us. I get dressed hop into line, Rogers in front of me as I’m taller than him; we line up from shortest to highest. Holt and Greer observe us, the former gazing up and down the line, “When we get back, we’re going to do more drills, but also review all the ranks and insignias of the Navy officers. As much as you need to be fit, you also need to learn this stuff if you want to graduate.”

We leave and walk down the stone white corridors and three flights of tight stairwells, awaiting the sustenance ahead. I'm not hungry, though. I can't think about food. I can only focus on the ache in my chest. My veins pulse in my cranium, threatening to burst through my skull. I thought I could do this, but I don't know anymore.

My arm begins to tingle. My chest aches.

I can't breathe very well.

Interlude #2

Though I didn't understand it then, I realize now that I wasn't ready to leave home. I had met new people and seen things which challenged my previous experiences in the world, but nothing so massive that I couldn't handle it. Yet what shocked me wasn't what was new, but rather what was familiar. I had a father figure who wanted me to succeed and a mother who would keep pushing me even though I wasn't able to handle something. The people around me were trapped like I was, but handling it better than I could, just like her. Just like my sister. I, however, was only focused on myself. I didn't know how selfish I was being, thinking only of myself rather than how my decisions impacted others. To this day, it still tears me apart inside. Only later would I realize it, even if I didn't want to accept it.

Part Three

Baptized by Water

The lack of solid ground is the first thing I notice. It's cold, but at least I know something is there. The rough hand behind me guides my body to the edge, nudging me off and downwards. The invisible weight pushing on my shoulders is the next thing. I accelerate, yet it feels like forever and a day passes before the water and I become one. That's the next thing, the water. Cold and unforgiving, I struggle to the surface and find myself surrounded by a handful of officers, guiding me to swim the fifty yards to the other side of the pool.

The first part is a swim test, where recruits must swim fifty yards from one end of a pool to another. I'm not the greatest swimmer on base, but the instructors tell us that we can use whatever method we see fit to make the swim. I backstroke my way along the water, my belly glistening from the water that blankets it. Other recruits, men and women alike, speed alongside me as we make it to the wall, struggling to catch our breath from the long swim.

The next part is the prone float, which is floating in the water for five minutes. Sounds simple, right? There's a catch, though.

The floating?

You gotta do it face down.

We're divided into groups of ten. Instructors jump into the pool before us, one of them waving his hands in the air as he tells us what to do, "You will float for five minutes, the majority of which will be spent underwater. You may come up for air

for only a few seconds before you must submerge again. Anyone who's struggling to keep their calm will be escorted out of the pool and assigned to come back another day to complete the test. Until you do so, you won't be able to graduate. Now, everyone in the pool."

The water's colder this time as I climb in. Maybe I'm still freezing from my fifty-yard swim. I push the thought out of my mind as a female instructor guides me to a spot in the quarantined area; part of the pool is separated from the rest for the prone float test. The head instructor who spoke earlier blows his whistle and we dive. I keep my eyes closed, focusing on my lack of breathing. My heart quickens, pulse thundering against my neck and chest. I open my eyes, desperate to find something to calm me down, but all I see are legs and arms from the other recruits, struggling to stay afloat and keep their heads underwater. My neck tightens, my hands reaching for the invisible vice around it.

It's happening again. I'm back in that river, drowning.

Dying.

I'm pulled back to the surface by the female instructor who guides me out of the pool as I gasp for air. My heart is thundering as the head instructor stands over me, a look of pity on his face. "Sorry, kid. Looks like you'll have to take the test another day."

Holt and Greer aren't happy. The veins showing on their heads are a good sign for that. Yet they have no say in the swim test. That's up to the commanding officers of the base. So, I'm assigned to go tomorrow. A few other recruits join me, Ramirez included. I suppose the golden boy can't float well either. It's the same process as before. Jump into the pool and float for five minutes. And like before, I freak out. I kick Ramirez in the chest on accident. He loses focus and can no longer keep his breath. We're both ushered out of the pool, the head instructor telling us to come back another day. The way back is a nightmare, Ramirez burning with rage as I know he wants to punch me in the face for making him fail. I feel horrible, even though I don't like the guy. Holt and Greer aren't happy either.

For the next few days, the results are the same as before.

Attempt #3: Fail. Ramirez passes, though.

Attempt #4: Fail.

Attempt #5: Fail.

Attempt #6: Fail.

By the seventh time, Holt is tired. He calls me into the office, folder in hand, "This is going to be the seventh attempt. You need to pass it this time. If you don't, then I can't promise what'll happen next. Dismissed."

I head out again for the pool with some recruits who still haven't passed the test. We walk into the tall building, reaching the locker room where we change into our swimming trunks and head towards the pool. There are more people there today. I sit with my fellow recruits on a metal bench as the head instructor addresses us,

“Today, we have some SEALs here to help with teaching you guys how to prone float properly. Listen well and maybe you’ll pass.”

We jump into the water and pair up with a SEAL, each of them floating alongside us. I’m strapped to a Styrofoam hose and a weight tied around my waist, just heavy enough to keep me mostly underwater, but without dragging me down. For eight minutes, I bob my head up and down, in and out of the water. The SEAL keeps telling me tips, “Pace yourself, take short breaths, and move slowly. That’ll help you conserve energy and remain calm.” I listen intently as I continue bobbing up and down, in and out of the water. I can’t help but smile. I’m not freaking out.

I’m not dying!

Eight minutes pass and the test begins. This time, however, I’m ready. I stay afloat and move only ever so slightly. I bob my head up and down, in and out of the water, only taking in what I need for air. Suddenly, I hear a whistle. Did I do something wrong? I look up and see the head instructor standing above me and uttering the words I’ve been waiting for, “Congrats, kid. You pass.”

I’m on Cloud Nine right now. I can’t believe it. I passed! Another recruit, a tall, black man with a smile to match Allen’s from my division named Thomas also passed. The two of us dance in happiness in the locker room as we get back into our uniforms and head off to our ship. The whole way back, I have to remind myself to stop jumping up and down in joy on the sidewalks and attracting an officer’s attention. Those SEALs were amazing. They helped me succeed, just like those five

strangers who saved me from drowning in the river. My eyes wander towards the officers and I freeze.

I see him.

A man dressed in dark gray, the same height as I am. I don't recognize his face. I never did. But I know that feeling in my gut. I've seen him before at the river. I'm sure he's been there before.

A chill runs down my spine.

It's not from the water.

"Hey, man. You okay?" Thomas bumps lightly onto my shoulder. I snap back to reality and blink rapidly. "I'm fine. Let's just get back now before Holt and Greer kill us."

"So, you finally passed? It's about damn time. I can't believe it took you so long to pass a simple prone float test. Just sit down and wait for everyone to finish." Holt turns back to our fellow recruits, barking orders as they sweat in misery.

How dare he? How dare he not congratulate us? He may not have a hard time doing the prone float, but it was hard for me. I guess he never almost drowned in a river. I place my backpack on a hook attached to my bunkbed and sit against a wall with Thomas and the sick recruits who can't do the exercises. Nothing is ever good

enough for these people. You accomplish something only for them to tear you down. Nothing will make them happy.

My left arm tingles. My chest aches. I begin coughing hard.

What do I do?

Why?

The second time we get to call home, I must stay in my bunk because I have pink eye. I curse and cough into my pillow as everyone around me gets into formation to head to the recreational center. I get out of my bunk and run over to a recruit named Clairborn. I hand him my phone number home and a piece of paper, "Hey, can you do me a favor? Can you call home for me and let my parents know that I couldn't call today because I'm sick? I have pink eye and have been having some chest pains, but I want them to know that I'm okay."

"Of course, man. No worries," he replies, quickly running into formation while I climb back into bed. Everyone heads off while I stay in bed, doodling in my notebook that the Navy supplies us for writing notes in when we're studying. About a half hour later, the rest of the unit comes back, and the day continues as usual. Exercising, reading our training manuals, cleaning, and getting yelled at for not having shiny boots or improperly writing something in our watch log. The sky outside soon turns dark as everyone gets ready for nighttime clean up before Greer yells from the office, "Newhall! Get in here!"

I bolt out of bed and head into the office where Greer is sitting at her desk. Her face, red as always, points towards me and she huffs, "So, we were notified that your mother has been trying to get a hold of you for the past few hours. Apparently, she contacted your recruiter who patched her to us."

Shit.

“I want you to call her now and let her know that you’re okay,” Greer says as she hands me her phone. I dial home and Mom answers after the first ring, “Hello? Honey, is that you?”

“It’s me, Mom. I’m okay,” I reply, turning away from Greer’s gaze.

“Good. I got so worried when your friend said you were sick.”

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to worry you.”

There’s a slight pause before she responds. She must have caught on that one of the petty officers is in the room with me. “Listen, about your chest pains? If you’re not feeling well, you should go to the doctors there. If this has been going on for some time now, you need to tell someone, otherwise it could get worse.”

I nod, “Okay, Mom. I understand. Listen, I gotta go. I love you.”

“I love you, too. God be with you, Sweetheart,” she hangs up. I hand the phone back to Greer, her face not as red as before, but with a look I’ve never seen. She looks like someone who’s been scared out of her wits end. She looks like a mother.

“Look, I don’t know why you told Clairborn to tell your mom that you’re sick. She didn’t need to know that. Because of what you did, she got so worried and contacted the base directly. Do you have any idea how stupid what you did is?”

“I’m sorry, Petty Officer. I just wanted her to know that I’m okay. I always do.”

“And how would she have known otherwise?”

I stare at her, unable to respond. Normally, if you stare at her, you’d get a new asshole torn open for you. But she doesn’t seem to care. “Next time, don’t tell your

mom that you're sick if she doesn't need to know. Don't put her through something like that again. Do you understand me?"

I nod in acknowledgement and return to my bunk, laying down as I ponder Greer's words. I only wanted to let my mom know that I am okay. Is that so wrong? But then again, did she have to know I'm sick? Did she have to know about my chest pains? Maybe not, but I've never hid this kind of stuff from my parents. I suppose I just want to hear her voice, a comforting melody when I feel bad. I miss her so much.

My arm tingles. My chest aches.

I close my eyes.

I don't know if I can keep doing this.

Crisis

On a sunny day that isn't a Sunday, we get to meet The Chaplain. Now, I'm not a religious person at all. I'm spiritual, but not religious. Going to a church where there's an indictment against the leadership about stealing the tithes and offerings for paying off the leadership kind of ruins your faith in religious organizations. Yet this man draws my attention. He looks a bit like me, brown hair and glasses, but taller by a few inches.

It's his words, though, that catch me.

Talking to us about the rigors of basic training and how it's okay to feel lost in the process, I can't help but cry. I don't even care if Holt and Greer are in the room. I don't know why I'm here anymore. I had all these dreams when I first came here, but now I don't see any of that happening. I don't know how to achieve it. It took me days to learn how to float properly and even now I still get scared of being underwater. I can't run as hard or as fast as my fellow recruits or keep up with the exercises. And the aptitude tests? They're fine, but even if you miss one question, you get yelled at. Nothing is ever good enough.

What's the point?

"So, how can I help you, Mr. Newhall?"

Mister? Okay, then.

I gulp, "I, um, I don't know. I guess I was hoping you could tell me."

"Well, I noticed you in the classroom. You seemed extremely upset. Care to tell me why?"

I cough, "I, uh, I've just not been feeling well for a while and I don't know how to handle it."

"Okay, so tell me, how have you not been feeling well?"

"Well, I'm coughing a lot. My left arm cramps up and my chest aches."

"And have you gone to the medical center about this?" The Chaplain asks as he drinks a cup of black coffee out of a Navy mug, probably one of the few Navy items in his office that are visible. Everything else? The plants? The family photos? It's all...normal.

"Not yet."

"And why not?"

I inhale, "Because...I'm afraid that if I do, they'll find something."

"Why would you be afraid of that?"

"Well, what if it's bad?"

The Chaplain brings his hands up under his chin, "Do you mean bad enough that you would be sent home?"

I look down at my hands resting in my lap, my fingers intertwining and releasing repeatedly. I know he's looking at me, waiting for me to respond. So, I shrug my shoulders, my ears picking up on him leaning back into his chair.

“You know, if there’s something possibly wrong, you should tell your RDCs and get it checked out. Unless, there’s another reason why you don’t want to say anything. Or maybe you want them to find something?”

I look up at him, “What do you mean?”

“I mean, maybe you think it’s all in your head. But I’m not a doctor and even I can tell your breathing is labored. You look exhausted, as if you’re going to pass out. But you don’t say anything. Is it because maybe you want to, but feel horrible about it?”

“I...”

The Chaplain leans forward, “Look, I get it. This life is difficult, and I commend you for coming here and giving your time to the service. Not many people would do so, and it takes a great amount of courage to do it. But it takes a greater amount of courage to say that enough is enough.”

I look at him, my eyes dry and wide open. “Are you saying that I should quit?”

“I’m not saying that at all. All I’m saying is that if you feel that something is wrong, you should say and do something about it.”

“You don’t understand, though. I chose to do this. If I go back now, I’ll be a failure. My family will be so disappointed in me. I...I don’t want to.”

“But is this really what you want? You need to decide what’s right for you. Maybe they won’t find anything at the medical center if you get it checked out. But don’t you owe it to yourself to see?”

“You sound like my mom.”

“Well, she’s right, Stephen.”

If my eyes could widen any further, they would fall out of their sockets. He called me by my first name. To hear someone call me by my first name in weeks smacks me in the face. That and his words. No preaching about God or the Navy. He just wants me to focus on me.

That’s it.

The Chaplain leans back and towards his office phone, pushing it towards me. “Maybe talking to your mother would help. Just dial 9 to open the off-base line and go from there.”

I stare at him for a moment, waiting for the other shoe to drop, but all he does is motion to the phone and moves towards his computer, giving me what little privacy, he can. So, I press 9 and dial home. A ring or two later, my mom answers, “Hello? Stephen, is that you?”

“Hi, Mom.”

“Oh, honey. Thank God. Are you okay?”

“I’m okay, Mom. I’m just talking with the chaplain here at base and he thought it would be a good idea for me to call home and talk to you.”

Mom chuckles, “Well, tell him thank you for letting you call home. I miss you, Sweetheart.”

I snifle, “I miss you too. I miss everyone. I...”

“What is it, Stephen?”

“I think I made a mistake, Mom.”

“What do you mean?” Her voice hitches at my words.

“I...I don’t know what I’m doing here anymore. Every day I feel like I want to scream and cry. And I never feel good. My chest aches all the time and I can’t breathe very well. I’m a mess.”

There’s a pause before Mom breathes again, “Listen, Stephen. I know you want this, but if you’re not feeling well, then you need to get it checked out and come home if they say you should.”

“But if I do, then what?”

“Honey, don’t worry about that. We’ll figure it out later. The important thing is that you stay safe. I can’t make you do anything, but I hope that you get this checked out. And if you are told to come home, then it’s okay. Honestly, I’d rather have you here than in the military.”

“So, you and Dad won’t get angry?”

“Your father? Maybe, but in the end, he’ll understand. He misses you just as much as I do. Whatever happens, it’ll be okay. Alright, Sweetheart?”

I hold back some tears as I gulp, “Okay, Mom. If anything changes, I’ll try to find a way to let you know. I gotta go now. Bye. I love you.”

“I love you too, Sweetheart. God be with you,” she says before I hear the click on her end. I place the receiver down and push the phone back to The Chaplain, now staring at me again. “So, how do you feel?”

I sigh, “A little better. I guess I just gotta figure out what I’m going to do.”

“Well, if you ever need anything, just ask. And trust me when I say that whatever you decide to do, it’ll be okay.”

“Thank you, Sir,” I smile as I get up and head back to my compartment. The walk up the cold stairwell and long hallways gives me time to walk slow as I ponder on Mom’s and The Chaplain’s words. I don’t know what I’m going to do, but I know that what’s going on right now isn’t working.

My left arm begins to tingle again. I cough horrendously into my hands. My chest begins to ache.

Oh God.

Interlude #3

When I was younger, I always heard that you never forget your past. That somehow, your actions and words will follow you and affect your life in ways you can't imagine. Through my trials at basic training, I saw how much my past weighed on me. My life didn't flash before my eyes or anything. Rather, everything I or someone else did just haunted me. I was infected by my memories and my habits. I couldn't shake them. I still can't. I didn't understand this then and today I still struggle with it. Only later did I finally accept what I had been fighting against for so long.

Part Four

It All Falls Down

During my first week in Division 196, we have a physical test to determine our fitness capabilities. I'm able to do the seventy push-ups and one hundred sit-ups that are required, but only because Allen, my partner, counts the ones that were only "half" a push-up or sit-up. Before we did the test, Holt said, "When you're spotting your partner, don't punk out on them and cause them to fail because they didn't do a complete rep. Even if they half ass it, you count the rep as a full one. Everyone here will pass, one way or another."

Running, however, is something no one can cover for.

The gymnasium is surrounded by red brick walls, the roof flat as an ironing board with black beams holding up the ceiling. Basketball hoops, gym equipment, sports balls, and other gym apparel litter the enormous room as people run drills in every corner. The air in here is atrocious. It feels pressurized, like it's thicker and heavier. That's what makes running so hard in here. You just can't catch a breath.

I fail the first running test. Well, I do worse than everyone else. The passing mark is ten minutes to complete twelve laps. I take fourteen minutes. The second test isn't any better. I complete the push-ups and sit-ups, but not the running portion again. Many people in the division don't complete the test within the required time. So, now we exercise in the gym every day for a couple of hours, trying to get everyone ready for the final exam which is in seven weeks.

Everyone lines up on the indoor track, ready to move. My chest heaves, now on fire even before I do anything physical or get stressed out. Still, it's not like I can back out. So, I wait and, in a minute, Greer shouts, "Go!" A second later, everyone is off. I try to run at a steady pace, my arms waiving back and forth to propel me along the track. Holt runs up alongside me, matching my pace as he says, "Look, you got this. Just keep steady. Breathe in, breathe out. It's not that hard. Just focus on your breathing."

I try to do as he says, but it's hard to focus when my chest is on fire. Holt stays alongside me for a while, but eventually moves on. We all keep running, but I start to slow down. I can't keep up with everyone else. Greer runs up beside me and shouts, "Move it, Newhall! Keep up with everyone else! What would your mother say now?"

I'm not cutting it here.

Just like I couldn't cut it in school.

"Why the fuck would you do this? Do you have any idea what you put us through? How could you do this? What did you think would happen when we found that note?" Mom shrieked, not pausing to catch a breath as she stomped and shouted. Not a child throwing a temper tantrum, but a grown woman who I stabbed in the back.

I sat there, immobile and destitute. One might mistake me for having succumbed to the cold, only upright due to a beam wedged against me. My sister's grip tightened around me, secure yet enflamed. I dare not look, but I know what I did. I knew what she was feeling.

"How could you lie to us about what was going on? Failing out of school? Wasting our money? Your money? What were you doing? I should have known something was going on. I should have known..."

Too exhausted to stand anymore, Mom sat on the couch, the waters still flowing away.

"Do you want to go home?"

I stare at Holt, shocked by his question. "No, Petty Officer!" I reply, my chest heaving more than before.

"Are you sure? Because it seems like you're not willing to try harder. It's like you're giving up. And I can't work with quitters. I refuse to do so. If you don't improve here, I'll make sure that you're separated from the division and sent home. I won't have anyone drag the division down. Do you understand me?"

Holt returns to the front of the formation, but everyone takes a moment to stare at me. Even Allen, Rogers, and Wong look at me with contempt. I feel disgusting, as if I got ripped open and someone defecated on my organs. My eyes tear up, but I

keep them from falling. I don't want to give them another reason to yell at me. I just march on with the rest of the formation, shrinking more and more with every gaze cast upon me.

The rest of the day doesn't go any better. It's just one thing hitting the fan after the other. The Yeomen not filing recruits' medical records properly. The Watch not cataloging daily activities accordingly. The bathrooms not being cleaned properly. Today, everything that can go wrong does go wrong and everyone is silent throughout it all. Even at chow time, where everyone talks even when we're not supposed to, there is silence. No one makes a move to try and help one another. I'm guilty of this too. I'm so lost that I have no idea what to do. All I can focus on is the fire in my chest. As the day ends, everyone gets ready for bed, but before that, Holt calls us to the center of the compartment, Greer having gone home two hours before lights out.

"Today, we were not on our game. No one was communicating. No one did their jobs properly. And there were those who couldn't keep up with everyone else. If there's anything I've tried to teach you grunts is to be strong and to work together. When one fails, we all fail. But when one succeeds, we all succeed! And the only way for that to happen is if we work together! No one did that today. Everyone just kept fucking around and fucking up! You all showed me that you can't cut it today and I don't know how to fix that. I can't do that. You gotta figure that out. Tomorrow is going to be different. Tomorrow, you WILL be a unit. Until then, fuck this and fuck all of you. I'm going home."

Without a glance, Holt bursts out of the compartment.

I've heard that voice before.

"Do you have anything to say for yourself?" Dad said, calm and frightening at once. His shadow covered me. It got colder.

"I'm sorry."

"I don't think you are. I think you were being selfish and still are. You took advantage of us and decided to run away rather than face us like a man. You had every opportunity to tell us what was going on and instead chose to hide it. That is not the way your mother and I raised you."

"I know."

"Part of me wants to throw your ass out. Hell, you chose to leave. Now you have the balls to come back here with your tail between your legs? Do you really think that changes anything?"

"...No."

"You have no idea how much you scared us. We had the cops searching for you. We waited for hours. We thought you were dead! Then you just decide to come back on your own, falling at our doorstep! Now all you have to say is you're sorry?!"

I lifted my head to meet his gaze. My eyes were dry; I couldn't cry anymore. Swords were aimed, ready to tear into my heart. I wanted them to.

My dad turned, unable to look at me anymore. I didn't blame him. "Go upstairs and go to bed. We'll talk about this tomorrow."

Samantha helped me up from the couch, my legs still numb from my twelve-hour trek across Vancouver. We reached the door to head upstairs before our dad whispered, "Stephen, what you did was all kinds of wrong. Don't ever do this again. You won't like what happens next."

I return to reality when I hear Ramirez screaming at the top of his lungs, "Petty Officer is right! We were shit today! We're supposed to be a team, and no one pulled their own weight. Well, you know what? Fine! I'm here for my family and I'm not going to let anyone stand in my way. So, if that means I gotta be a hardass like Petty Officers Holt and Greer, then that's what I'm going to do!"

THUD!

"Holy shit!" Castus shouts as he runs over to another recruit named Mitchell. I am so focused on Ramirez that I completely miss Mitchell passing out in front of me. Yeoman Martin runs to the office phone and calls up the medical officer on duty tonight, Ramirez and Castus kneeling beside Mitchell while everyone looks on in fear. A few minutes go by before the medical officer arrives with a couple more sailors who bring a stretcher. Mitchell is loaded onto the contraption and shuttled out of the compartment with the medical officer shutting the door on his way out.

By now, everyone is just tired. Too much has gone on today to speak any further. Without a word, everyone heads to bed. Fortunately, I don't have watch tonight, so I just lay on my hard mattress and think about everything that happened today. Ramirez and Holt are right, as much as it pains me to say it. We all failed today. Ramirez reminds me of my sister, the look in her eyes from that night, so long ago.

I didn't react, only stared into the dark as Samantha and I headed towards my room. What took only a few minutes felt like days, my legs buckling under all 160 pounds of me. We reached my room and I forced myself into bed. My sister just looked at me, no words leaving her lips. She was crying. A moment passed, and she left. I was alone in the dark.

I cried.

I cried.

I cried.

Tonight, I don't sleep. I just lay there, staring into the dark. My eyes are shut, entranced by the tingling in my left arm and the aching in my chest. I cough, but I'm too tired to care. I just lay there. Alone.

In the dark.

I can't do this anymore.

The Time Has Come

“Recruit? Come on back,” a tall, male hospital corpsman calls out to me.

I follow him down a narrow hallway filled with hospital beds and medical equipment before I’m ushered into an exam room filled with what you’d typically find in a doctor’s office: stethoscopes, a case for used syringes, a container of antibacterial wipes, and much more. Ten minutes pass before an old man walks in, dressed in a white coat and carrying his own stethoscope. “Alright, Mr. Newhall. What seems to be the problem?”

“Well, I’ve been having lots of chest pains and coughing repeatedly. My left arm has also been having a tingling feeling that won’t seem to go away.”

“Any history of heart conditions?”

“I did have some surgery when I was an infant on my aorta. It should be in my file,” I motion towards the folder in his hands. He observes it and writes down some notes before getting up from his seat to examine me. The next twenty minutes are spent conducting test after test, including an EKG and bloodwork. He leaves the room and I just sit in silence, almost missing the chaos of the compartment. My heart beats fast again as I wait for the results, but regardless of what they say, I know there’s something wrong.

I can feel it in my bones.

The Doctor returns to the room, my file a little bigger than before, probably from the tests he conducted. “So, I have your results and it looks like you have early stage

pneumonia. We caught it early enough to where you can take medications, but other than that, you seem fine.”

Fine? FINE? I don't feel fine! My chest is blazing now, my breathing becoming heavier with every passing second. The Doctor's eyes widen at the sight of me as he walks over and places a hand on my shoulder. I can't hold it in anymore, “Doctor, something is wrong. I can feel it, even now. My chest always hurts, and I can't stop thinking about it. There must be something else going on. What about contacting my cardiologist? Is there any way we can do that? There must be something.”

“Well, I'm not sure if there's anything else we can learn from your files. I think we have everything nec-”

“Please, sir. There has to be something.”

The Doctor exhales before stepping back and sighing, “All right. Here's what we'll do. I'm going to have you call home and see if your folks can get your cardiologist to fax over everything he has. Every test and recommendation he can muster. If there's something, we'll move on from there.”

I follow him out to the hallway where he guides me to a phone that I can use. I dial my mom's number and after two rings, she answers, “Hello? Stephen, is this you?”

“It's me, Mom. I'm at the medical center on base. I need your help.”

Mom gasps, “Oh, Sweetheart. What's wrong?”

“The Doctor says I have pneumonia, but I know something else is going on. He's recommending that we get my medical records faxed over for further examination. I

need you to get ahold of Dr. King and have him send over everything. Tell him about all the physical activity I've been doing and see if he can make any recommendations for the doctors here."

"Okay, honey. Just make sure you can stay there until we get the info over there. Don't worry. I'll take care of everything."

"Thank you, Mom. I have to go."

"Okay. Bye, Sweetheart and stay safe," Mom replies before disconnecting the call. I place the receiver back on its resting place before returning to the waiting room. Four hours pass by as I can see the sun beginning to set through the windows. Eventually, The Doctor comes for and guides me back to the exam room. I sit on the exam table as he stands in front of me, a heavy look on his face. "So, we were able to get all your cardiologist's notes and files over to us and while pneumonia is still the primary concern, given your heart history and your cardiologist's recommendation that you may not be able to handle such intense physical labor coupled with the psychological stresses, I'm recommending immediate medical separation and processing out of the Navy. I'm sorry, Mr. Newhall."

I nod my head as I absorb his words. I can't believe it.

I'm going home.

The Doctor guides me back to the front lobby where he helps me get my medication for my pneumonia and fills out my pass to head back to the ship with all the forms for processing out of the division. Walking back, my chest tightens again. I

cracked. I just can't handle it anymore. I know I can't and now I'm going home. Yet I feel worse than I did this morning.

I...failed.

I re-enter the building and sit against a wall near the main entrance; my division is still at the Marlinspike assessment and recruits aren't allowed to be in a compartment all by themselves. An hour passes before I learn of their return and can proceed to the compartment. I walk inside and find everyone roaring in joy. I assume they all passed.

"So, Newhall? What's the verdict?" Holt bellows from the office, greeting me at its entrance. I hand him my papers and say nothing, unable to look the man in the eye. He sifts through the documents; the smile leaving his face and being replaced with a small frown. He sits at his desk and fills out more forms, each of them related to one thing: my separation. He starts filing the papers in order before he turns to me, "I guess this is it then, huh?"

"I...I'm sorry, Petty Officer."

"I am too, Newhall. I am too. But shit happens. You just gotta roll with it. Just go get your things and someone will guide you to SEPS," he replies, a sad look on his face. I turn away and head to my bunkbed, grabbing my duffel bag and piling stuff in there. Everyone looks at me and immediately know what's happening. One by one, recruits start reaching out and wishing me luck and good health. You know, that Hallmark crap you'd find on cards. Allen and Rogers walk over, and both give me a hug. I guess now that I'm not part of the division anymore, the rules don't matter. I

pick up my stuff and head towards the entrance, a small tan petty officer meeting me along the way. "I'm here to take you to SEPS, the medical separation unit. Got everything you need?"

"I do, Petty Officer." There's a slight hitch in my voice. I still can't comprehend what's about to happen.

"Hold on a moment," Holt says as he exits the office, handing the tan petty officer my paperwork before guiding me in front of everyone. I look at him with fear, wondering if he's going to ridicule me again.

"Listen up, everyone! As you can guess, Newhall is separating out of our division and will be going home. I know some of you will miss him and, truth be told, he will be missed by me too. I know that this man is going to succeed at whatever he decides to do and prove to be a benefit to the world. So, I want you all to know that and aspire to that level of strength."

Is he serious?

I can barely focus as everyone begins applauding and whistling in response to Holt's comments. I turn to face the man and he takes my hand in his, whispering, "You're going to be fine. I believe that. Just get well and get back out there. I know you got this."

I let go and follow the tan petty officer out of the building and into another one that isn't as tall, but a lot wider and longer. I meet a recruit down at the front desk of what they call SEPS who guides me into a room twice as large as the compartment I was in with dozens of recruits, all waiting to go home. I place my

toiletries and other belongings aside from my uniforms into the small compartments under the mattress before handing everything else to the petty officer on duty. It's almost time to go to bed, so I head to the bathroom and relieve myself before returning to my bunk and laying down. I let out a breath that I didn't know that I was holding in and close my eyes.

My chest still aches. My arm still tingles. But something is different now.

I can sleep.

I close my eyes.

Good night, world.

Goodbye.

Interlude #4

I was broken. It was a hard lesson to learn, to admit that I wasn't ready and to make the decision to leave basic training and come home. Many have told me that leaving was okay and that by doing so, I saved my own life from what could have been a major health concern.

But I knew the truth: I had failed.

My dream was gone. I didn't understand then how things would turn out, but I suppose other things were at play here.

Now, I do understand.

Now, I think I can see more clearly.

Part Five

SEPS

For the next month, I reside in SEPS, the medical unit. Originally in Room A, I move to Room B the next morning as there's more space over there. Just as big as the first room, there's clearly less former recruits in it. The bathrooms are bigger with more stalls and wider showers with heads on the walls and in the center of the space. Near the back of the room is a bookshelf filled with books that are clearly not Navy-related. One guy freaks out when he reads *Fifty Shades of Gray*, claiming that he found porn in the room. There are also puzzles which we can build in our free time when we're not cleaning.

It's a far cry from Division 196.

Every so often, we get a new petty officer to look out for us. Some are nice and speak to us like normal people, trying to offer some advice for when we get back home. One whose name I can't remember tries to give us financial advice, particularly in preparation for school. Some of the guys roll their eyes at the idea, but I listen intently. I don't know if I'll go back, but it doesn't hurt to try, right? Others make us laugh. One named Jenkins would always come in with a megaphone shouting, "Wakey, wakey!" when it's time to get up in the morning. Then there are the mean ones like Meyers who would always talk down to us, finding any reason possible to give us a hard time. Still, it isn't the same as before. You would always get someone new which made it interesting.

The building also has its own recreational center. There are small arcade games which everyone can play on; men and women fight for them, threatening to bash people with quarters they get when we get to go to the main recreation center to stock up on supplies. I don't play on any of them, no. There are about six pool tables I can play on. The guys and I all take turns playing, making a big competition out of it. I play a lot against a guy named Burton, dark-skinned and the same height as I am. He always wipes me over the floor except once when he knocks the eight ball in before he finishes his set of solids. That is a joyous day.

Cleaning the room, despite its size, isn't as difficult as it was in 196. We get more time to clean and everyone just has fun. We can talk and laugh at anyone and anything. The officers don't seem to mind if we get stuff done. I also help as one of the yeomen of the group, helping keep track of medical records and filling out passes when someone needs to go to the medical center, chapel, or somewhere else on base. We play card games sometimes while in the office, something I wouldn't have been able to do back in my old unit.

Some of the guys here aren't bad. He's not here for long, but I bunk with a guy named Burton for a couple of weeks. From family to movies, we talk about everything. There's also Wayne and Elliott. Without them, I don't think I'll survive. Sadly, they go home before I do, but we make sure to trade contact information. These are guys I want to make sure I can stay in touch with. No one, not even Allen, Rogers, or Wong, can make me smile like them.

One day, we head down to the main recreational center for a day to call home and let our families know about our travel plans back home; I get to go in a week, so I know my parents will be happy to hear that. Well, Mom will, anyways. Dad isn't too happy that I couldn't make it, but I hope he'll get over it. I walk into the lunch room and find myself with face to face with my old unit. Apparently, they get to come down here before their graduation. Everyone, including Ramirez, comes up to say hi and ask how I'm doing, no ill will at all for having been medically separated. I learn that Petty Officer Holt has been promoted to Chief Select and soon find myself face to face with him. He cheers in excitement and takes my hand in his, "Holy shit, man! How are you?"

"I'm good Petty...I mean, Chief Select Holt. Congrats on the promotion!"

He smiles, "Thank you. I'm stoked. Just like about how well the unit has done with all their tests."

"Yeah, that's great," I murmur, my eyes dipping down to the floor. Holt sees this and kicks his voice up a couple of decibels, "So, when do you head home?"

I look up, "Hopefully in a week or so."

"That's awesome. Any plans for what you're gonna do? Maybe get into the medical field like you were intending to do here?"

I smile at how he knows the plans I had coming in, "Maybe. We'll see once I get back home."

“Well, whatever you decide, I’m sure you’ll do great and it’ll be worth it.”

“Yeah, just tough.”

“Nothing worth it is ever easy. Maybe this didn’t work out, but whatever comes next will.”

I look him dead in the eye. “You think so?”

“I know so,” he replies, no wavering in his eyes or words. He checks his watch for a moment. “It’s time for us to head back to the ship. It was good seeing you again, Newhall. I hope whatever you do takes you places. Best of luck.”

I chuckle, “You too, Chief.”

Holt smiles and shakes my hand again before gathering up my old unit to head back to their ship. Everyone smiles as they head off and I watch as they leave the building and walk away. In the distance, I see the man in the dark gray suit again, just like after the swim test. I still can’t make out his face, but I know he’s looking at me. I don’t know what he wants, but I can tell when he moves his head up and down that he nods at me, turning away and towards a crowd of officers in the distance. He’s gone.

I feel a flutter in my chest and reach up with my left hand. My arm doesn’t tingle. My chest doesn’t ache. I close my eyes for a moment, uttering a small prayer. I smile, basking in the joyous commotion and the thought that this will all be over soon, and I get to start over again.

The Crossroads

The bus ride to the airport takes maybe forty minutes. It's slow and there's traffic, so my fellow former recruits and I just have to sit, the sun peering through the windows to beat us with its hellish light. I lean over the back of my seat to see everyone's faces. More women than men, a clear change from the hordes of penises that I've been witness to for the past two months. One catches my eye. A slender girl with tan skin and a bobbed hairdo. She's chatting with an Asian girl before she sees me. She smiles, her teeth glowing off the sun's rays. I smile back. "Hey there. What's your name?"

She laughs, "I'm Trixie. Who are you?"

"Newhall, but you can call me Stephen. We're not in the Navy anymore, so I guess it's okay to use my first name."

She laughs harder, "You're right about that. Stephen, huh? It's nice to meet you."

My own smile widens, "You too, Trixie."

We only get to talk for a minute or so before we finally arrive at the airport and are shuttled off the bus, Trixie being sent to one entrance and me being sent to another in a different part of the airport. A frown forms on my face as I walk inside the airport and hand my ticket to the receptionist who checks it and my backpack before guiding me towards the security gate. Five minutes later, I walk through and towards the gates. First thing's first, though. I bolt for the nearest Starbucks stand

and buy three venti hazelnut lattes; I haven't had any form of coffee or decent caffeine in two months and I need some. NOW!

In one sitting, I down each cup in five minutes. My throat burns from the heat, but I don't care. It feels so good. I throw the cups away and look at a clock on a wall. 12:07pm. Five hours until I go home. I begin walking around the airport, taking in the sights that I couldn't see the first night I got here. Restaurants packed with people stuffing their faces with food ranging from Chinese to McDonald's. Bookstores filled from wall to wall with young adult tales, crime dramas, and more copies of Fifty Shades of Gray than what a horny recruit would be able to handle. I see suitcases on display for travel stores and convenient stands filled with magazines, candy, and soda. But what I see that grabs my attention are the people. Men, women, and children, all running back and forth to their gates. They all know where they're going. They know what's ahead.

I don't.

I head back towards my gate, bored and aching from all the walking. That's when I see her. Trixie. She spots me in the distance and we move towards each other.

"Hey, I was hoping I'd see you again," a smile popping up on her face. I smile back.

"Well, here I am."

We grab coffee from the Starbucks stand, the barista staring at me like I'm insane for drinking more caffeine and sit at Trixie's gate which is across from mine. We chat for who knows how long, talking about our pets, families, and anything else

I can think of. The whole time, I can't stop smiling. I don't think about the Navy or what may await me back home. Nothing else matters except our conversation.

"So, what do you think you're going to do when you get back?" She asks, taking a sip from her coffee.

I laugh, "Honestly, I have no idea. I guess I don't know anything at this point."

"Me neither. I thought I had it all figured out and this was going to be the best thing for me, but I guess not. I'm sure you'll be fine, though."

I blink and stare, "How do you know?"

"Call it a gut feeling."

"A gut feeling is what got me here in the first place."

She laughs, "Maybe, but maybe next time your gut will point you to the right thing."

I can't help the laugh that escapes my lips. "Okay, well, I hope you're right."

"I know I am."

My eyes widen, "Really?"

"Yes."

"How?"

She leans back in her seat and reaches for my hand, "Because things don't just happen. We meet people, do things, and sometimes we mess up. But sometimes, we can do something right. We're screwed up, but even we can find something that makes us happy."

My fingers curl around hers, my heart fluttering in my chest. I don't know this girl and yet she seems to know me. Not personally, but nobody can make my heart react like that without knowing me. I'm scared, but I can't pull away. "You really think it'll be okay?"

"One way or another, it will be. I guess we'll just have to find out."

The speakers above us announces Trixie's flight is about to board. We get up and she embraces me for a moment. My arms tighten around her, my heart crying when I must let go. "Find me on Facebook. Let's stay in touch." I nod my head and watch as she waves goodbye and walks onto the gate. Part of me is screaming to go with her, but then I replay her words. I hear her tell me that it'll all be okay and that things happen for a reason. I smile, thinking back on everything that has happened. I'm sad that I couldn't cut it in the Navy. I'm scared to find out what happens next. But now I feel things which I haven't felt in a long time.

Excitement.

Joy.

Peace.

The speakers above announce that my flight is ready to board. I stand in line for my plane, a smile on my face as I get ready to board. I have no idea what comes next. I could fail again.

But I won't.

I hand my ticket to the flight attendant. "Welcome aboard, Mr. Newhall! Have a safe flight home!"

Home. Yes.

I take my ticket and walk through the gate, the smile never leaving my face.

Here we go.

Interlude #5

Looking back on everything that happened, I have regrets. A piece of me died with my experience in the Navy, that's true. But writing it all out, I see it differently. Yes, I set out to do something and I failed. Yes, I made a mistake and it cost me dearly. But part of life is to live it, to face things that have the potential to destroy you. Things that rip you apart and you must fight to survive and rebuild yourself into something stronger. I'm still learning how to do that, and I have a long way to go before I'm whole again.

But now, I feel ready to face the future.

Brave New World

“How are you going to pay for this?”

“How long will this take?”

“What does your mother think about this?”

“What are you going to use an English degree for?”

“I’m just not sure how this is going to work out.”

Clouds continue to roll and cry in sync with the hammering of my father’s questions as I reach Concordia University – Portland, noticing how the parking lot is sparse compared to the lot at Clark College. I reach into the back seat and grab my backpack, pausing for a moment as I retract and gaze at the monument before me. It is different from the buildings at Clark, almost three times the size, brick and plexiglass coat its body as I stand in its shadow. Looking over it, I see a name:

George R. White Library.

“Okay, a library. This isn’t so bad,” I murmur as I reach back down for my bag. I swing it over my shoulders, shut the door, lock the car, and begin walking up the steps. Suddenly, I feel like I am being pushed back. Like the Greek myth of Sisyphus and his eternal struggle with the rock, I am fighting against an invisible hand that is trying to push me back. A voice that is echoing in my mind to turn around, to hop back into my car and head back to the safety of my house. I look down and feel my left arm tingling.

Not again...

This is not the first time this has happened. This tingling. It always seems to happen when I am faced with a challenge. No, I do not mean a challenge like

organizing my garage. I mean a real challenge. A hurricane crashing against the levy, threatening to tear it down and devastate the city you call home. You prepare as best as you can, plan for every eventuality, and construct a fortress to protect yourself.

Still, you can feel the wind and rain crash upon your body like glass, piercing your flesh like a thousand knives. You feel this hurricane roar and you shake, knowing this could be the end.

That kind of tingling.

Ever since I broke my elbow and never rode my bike again, I have always been afraid to put myself out there and try something new. Interviewing for a new job? Meeting new people? Opening my heart to others? All of it I always found challenging and what I intended to shy away from.

School is the worst, though. It's probably because of how important it is to my family. What if I screw this up again? What if my dad is right? What if this is the wrong move? What if I don't have this?

My breath grows heavy as the shaking quickens. Tears well up in my eyes, threatening to soak the earth in their descent. I try to calm myself down, to think of something that can stop me from...myself.

That's when I hear it. My sister's voice, uttering what she's said all her life.

"You got this, brother! I believe in you!"

I hear Holt, firm and full of pride.

"I know you got this."

I hear Trixie's voice, a distant cry from a time long since passed, yet as vivid as the metal doors before me.

"Things don't just happen. We meet people, do things, and sometimes we mess up. But sometimes, we can do something right. We're screwed up, but even we can find something that makes us happy."

My heart stops beating for a moment. Then it starts again, but not like before. It's not thumping. No, it's dancing.

Repeating their words like a song, my heart falls into tune with everyone's declarations. A composition of melodies all bound together by a single thread. A symphony that makes my heart dance with the grace of a prima ballerina and the power of a matador. Soon enough, the pieces begin to fall perfectly into place, each one adding to the picture before me. I am a man in an endless sea, the enormity threatening to devour me. Yet I feel that which I have so longed for: peace. A beautiful melody that tamed the beast within, that lifted the veil around my eyes so that I could truly see.

I stare at the building, its shadow blanketing the lot. Men and women alike pour in and out of it oblivious to the vastness of its countenance I see only the desire to fill themselves with knowledge, seeking to enrich their lives for years to come. A smile creeps on my face as I move towards the obelisk, its shadow becoming smaller and smaller. I walk inside and see not darkness nor light.

I see the picture.

I smile.

I was afraid, but now I'm not.

This isn't my rock. This is my canvas, my song, my story.

"Hello, Concordia," I say, walking through the doors. I am met by crisp white walls and dark floors. Books line along the expanse, trees within the building. A coffee shop stands within the library, the smell of a hazelnut latte calling my name like the siren beckoning Odysseus to his doom. A world within a world. A haven where one may shut out the grime and chaos of society and gain the tools to change it, hopefully for the better. It is the people, though, who catch my eye. Everyone of different visages and different creeds, all here for the same reason that I am here. The smile on my face grows ever wider as my heart warms.

I am not alone anymore.

My eyes go towards my phone. It is almost time for class. Placing my phone back, I glance towards the staircase, the road on which my path begins anew. Someone comes up to me and asks, "Hey, do you need some help finding something? You look a little lost."

A chuckle escapes my lips as I begin to move forward, glancing back at the stranger to say what has been eluding me for some time. At least, until now...

"Thank you, but it's all good. I got this."

I ascend the stairs, finding myself alone on the third floor. I sit on a bench and pull out my schedule: Creative Writing – Fiction is first on the list. I wonder how it will go. Soon enough, people begin to fill the halls, joining me in anticipation of the first day. There is a tall guy with wavy brown hair, a smile as bright as the sun

adorning his face. A bearded guy who I think could punch my head off my neck if he wanted to, whispering to a tall woman, hair tied back into a bun and sipping a mug of coffee. One person stands out, though. Shorter than me and with glasses and wavy black hair, the laughter that pours from her like a tsunami is overpowering, yet infectious. The smile on my face grows.

It's 9:00am. I hear something amidst the songs in my head and chatter of who I assume are my classmates. A pair of feet moving towards us.

Click, clack.

Click, clack.

I see her, brown hair and books in her arms. I remember meeting her when I first visited Concordia. Truth be told, I was intimidated at first, but meeting and listening to her knowledge was validation, a silent promise that this would be an amazing experience.

"Good morning, class!" Dr. Knutsen says as she opens the door to the room. Everyone pours in, my assumption proven true. I stare at the entrance, inhale, and step forward.

Here we go.

We enter class and begin with a freewriting exercise. I close my eyes for a moment, opening them to find myself in a hospital, filled with the living and the dead. I walk and walk, watching life begin and end, before I find myself in a room with a baby boy in the center, tied to tubes and fighting to breathe. I walk to him, pausing when I see his mother at one end of the room, praying for him to survive. I

smile. I look at the boy again and smile. "You don't get to die today," I whisper before exiting the room.

His story, my story isn't over.

It's only just begun.

Again.

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