

"Chorus"
Brea Creel

'Hey,' she says over the phone one afternoon. I'm eating chips and watching Sabrina the Teenage Witch in between typing in answers to the homework on my laptop. 'Can I come over this weekend?'

'What for?' I ask, the salt from the chips burning my mouth while I wait for her answer.

'Mom and him are fighting again. She went to Grandma's this morning.' There's a snort from her end of the phone. 'So, can I?'

My finger hovers over the question mark on the keyboard, and something churns deep in my stomach.

'Sure. Let me ask Mom.'

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'Why weren't you there in sixth?'

She stops by the refrigerator. I tap my foot impatiently, letting my binder drop to the ground.

'Oh, you know.'

'Spit it out.'

She sighs, grabs a bottle of water. 'My period.'

'That's a reason to skip a class?'

'Two classes, actually. I wasn't there seventh either.'

I feel the urge to pinch the bridge of my nose. It's only three o' clock, and I'm already developing a headache. Nice.

'You couldn't go to the damn nurse? She would've given you a tampon.'

The Cheshire-cat grin on her face makes me falter. Her black-painted fingernails scrape the neck of the water bottle as she says, 'Went there fifth. She gave me three.'

'Oh.'

'Yeah.'

There goes my speech on skipping class. It's one of my best, right between Pot Kills Your Brain and Homework is Cool. Pulling down the edge of my shirt, I slide onto the counter. 'I thought you said your mom made you an appointment at the doctor?'

'She did. I cancelled.'

Are you kidding? 'What for? You seriously need to get that checked out, you know you bleed way too much.'

For the first time since we've been home, she looks uncomfortable. 'Yeah, well. I don't do doctors. You know that.'

Sometimes I feel like my only role in this play is The Voice of Reason.

'Um, it doesn't matter what you do. This is a health thing.'

'Doctors always ask you stuff. I hate that.'

'It's their job,' I point out as she pops open a bag of fruit snacks. 'Give me some.'

She tosses a few into my cupped palm, wandering over to the blinds and pulling them back. Her eyes squint as she stares into the blinding sunlight. 'Yeah, but, you know. I hate it when people ask me stuff. Personal questions. Ew.'

This is the second, fifth, eighteenth time we've had this exact conversation. We're a record stuck on repeat, right before the chorus.

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It's eight fifteen. She went home yesterday, which means for the first time in a week I've got my room to myself again.

'Bliss,' I mumble, listening to my brothers screaming outside.

'What?'

'Nothing.'

I like my privacy, but I like her too. The phone shifts between my ear and my shoulder as I turn down the volume on the TV.

'What did you guys do in gym today?' she asks.

'Same shit as always. Ran around the track about eighty-six times,' I mutter. She cackles.

'Ha ha, I don't have gym.'

'You will next semester,' I say, pointing out the obvious. It's what I do best.

'Whatever.'

We're silent for a few minutes- me reading, her probably attempting to make dinner. Usually even toast is a challenge for her.

I'm about to break the stillness of our conversation to ask for the actual definition of the word velour (what kind of fabric is it, anyway?) when there's a slam from her end of the phone.

"Who's there?" I ask. "Your mom?"

"Him," she sighs, and then yells, "Hey!" to her stepfather.

Still stuck on the velour question, I don't bother to try and make out the low mumbles from the other side of the phone. Probably just him telling her she's got to baby-sit or something.

"Hey, I gotta go," she says suddenly. Her words sound dry and tight, like there's sandpaper wallpapering her throat,

and I frown, try to ask why, but she continues, "See you at school, 'kay?"

The dial tone sounds before I can answer, "Okay."

* * *

It's morning, five minutes before class starts. She walks in wearing yesterday's shirt and a smile.

'Brought a brownie for lunch,' is the explanation tossed my way.

I nod and don't mention the bruise on her hip when her shirt rides up.

* * *

'Have you ever had a nightmare before?'

The question only half-startles me. 'Yeah,' I answer, narrowly avoiding accidentally hanging up the phone as I maneuver my way around the dog and cat, lying tangled together on the floor. 'We all have nightmares, I guess.'

'I've been having this nightmare.'

Even though she can't see it, I nod. Her insomnia is a running joke between us, but at times like these I can't help but think of it as tragedy rather than comedy.

'Yeah?' I prod.

'It's like.' She takes a deep breath, and for some strange reason, I picture her inhaling fire. 'It's like, I'm in a desert. And I'm on my hands and knees, kneeling, like I'm praying or whatever? So I look up.'

Her pauses are always at completely inopportune moments. 'And then?'

'And then,' she continues, abruptly, as though she hadn't stopped at all. It's a bad habit she has, along with a million good ones that she never seems to see. 'And then I look up, and I see Jesus. Like, on the cross.'

'What, are you a prophet now?' I joke, covering my eyes with my hand to try and ward off another headache. 'Are you going to start hearing God's voice in a vineyard?'

It's like I didn't say anything at all. Her voice has a strange metallic sound, now, when she goes on, 'It's all gory and shit, his hands and feet nailed. and I look him in the eyes. And he's got the most- the most disappointed look on his face. Like, just seeing me. just seeing me makes him disgusted, you know?'

There's a pause.

'Yeah,' I lie. 'I know.'

* * *

That night, I pop The Exorcist in my DVD player and wake up the next morning with a scream caught between my teeth and sweat drying on my face.

I don't want her to be alone.

* * *

'Hey,' she says randomly, in the middle of class. I glance up from my worksheet, glare pointedly, and with an eye roll she starts scribbling on hers again while she whispers. 'If I needed a kidney, would you give me one?'

'Um,' I say. 'Sure. Why not.'

She nods, satisfied. Her scribbles of answers have turned into doodles. 'How 'bout a heart?'

'Am I already dead?'

'No.'

I mimic her eye roll. "Whatever. Sure, just carve my heart right out of my body."

'Sweet!' she cheers. The teacher raises his eyebrows, and we both hunch in our seats. 'What about a body?' she whispers a second later.

I laugh. 'I'll hop right out of my skin. Totally.'

'I'll take you up on it one day,' she jokes.

But, as hard as I try, I just can't hear her laugh.

* * *

"I'm tired," she announces at midnight.

'Drink milk,' I suggest groggily, rubbing the sleep from my eyes. My cell phone almost slips from my hands as I stretch out in bed. I fumble it back down to my mouth. 'What do you want?'

'To chat with you, sweetie,' she sings. I stick my tongue out even though she can't see.

'I was asleep.'

'Now you're not.'

'I was.'

'Point?'

'Ugh.'

Repeat. Repeat. Repeat.

* * *

The midnight conversations go on for a week.

'You are so lucky it's summer,' I tell her, staring out my open window. The moon streaks our utterly normal backyard a ghostly silver. 'Otherwise I'd be forced to kill you.'

'Yeah, now you can just do it at your own leisure.'

'This is true.' I curl onto my side, cushioning the phone between my ear and the mattress. 'So, why can't you sleep?'

'Just stuff.'

'Just stuff,' I mock. 'Come on, tell me. I've been bearing the brunt of your 'stuff.''

Her voice goes quiet. 'Nah, I think that's me.'

Wrong thing to say. The record get scratched this late at night. 'Duh. So what's been up?'

'Nothing.'

Pause.

'Well—'

And then her breath catches, like a sob is wavering in her throat. 'Shit. Never mind. I gotta go.'

I sit up so fast it knocks my pillow to the floor. 'Wait, what f—'

'Bye,' she says, voice gone so high that if I wanted to I could make fun of her for channeling Minnie Mouse. My hands clench the sheets so tightly my knuckles go white. I hear the rustle of fabric as she makes to hang up her phone.

And, God help me, I hear a deep voice murmur Good right before the dial tone sounds in my ear, like a game show buzzer, like the very worst possible answer.

* * *

As much as I want to throw up, I go to school the next day just to see her face. It looks exactly the same. Smooth and make-up free and paler than Snow-freaking-White.

'Why're you staring at me?' she asks at lunch, amused, hand on her hip. Probably still bruised hip.

'Your beauty blinds me,' I say lightly, and hope to God she knows I'm not lying.