

*holding on, and letting go*

by Hannah Smith

MORNING OF

I wake up. This isn't out of the normal for me, I mean, if I didn't wake up, I'd be comatose, but the thing is, I wake up of my own free volition. Not to a glass of water dumped on my head, just narrowly missing my self-built PC or my comic books. It's weird. I shower and watch the floor and curtain for any booby traps. Ha. And I smell my shampoo. Once, my roommate, Mr. A, put mayo in my conditioner. He says it's a sign of the times changing; that I use conditioner. He's like that: an ass.

But he does have redeeming qualities. Mr. A- and yes, I have to call him that, even though I am in the same year of residency as him, and twenty-fricking-eight- is a genius. Like, off the charts IQ. He could have been a doctor right now, living in a penthouse or some other classy place, with tons of beautiful women, but he got caught cheating on his MCATs and had to start fresh. So he became a street pharmacist for a while, which is code for drug dealer. I learn a lot from him. He's becoming a doctor now, even though he's old and bitter.

And he usually makes coffee. But when I get to the kitchen, the pot is empty. Which sucks. Like, really friggin' sucks. I pour myself a heaping serving of Cinnamon Toast Crunch and go to the man cave to eat it. I like calling our living room a man cave for no other reason other than I can. We split the rent 50-50, so he can call the bathroom the shithole if he wants, so long as I get my man cave. Which is totally sick. I have a PS4 and a crapton of games. Mr. A keeps his movies on the shelves, and they're all old and painful, some of them in black and white, but I watch them anyway because it's one of the things that he doesn't complain about.

Finally, I leave. It's sorta nice to not hear a comment about how the designs on my shirt make me look fat or by becoming a doctor I'm a total Indian stereotype. I'm worried, though. It's not like him to just leave. Maybe he's at some girl's place, getting chased out with half his clothes on. Or drunk. Or both. I laugh and feel a bit better. He can fend for himself.

I send him a text: Where r u? Going 2 be l8 for taylor ..she'll b mad.

My grammar is atrocious, but it's not like I'm going to be writing sonnets or whatever. No, I'm going to be saving lives. Hell yeah. Maybe I get overexcited, but it's hard not to. It's like I'm Iron Man, or something, when I charge the paddles and slam them against someone's chest, or when I diagnose someone with Creutzfeldt-Jakob's disease, like I did last year, when they all thought it was schizophrenia. That was awesome. Not the patient being sick and eventually dying a slow, miserable death part. The whole patting on the back part was sweet, though.

Lunch is great. It's awesome. I love lunch. Every time I go to the cafeteria, I get a burger, an energy drink, and fries. Extra ketchup.

And I get to sit and read comic books. And journals. And textbooks. I hate quiet- it's so boring, and there's so many better things you could be doing, like hangliding, or dissecting frog hearts, but it's kinda nice. Halle sits next to me and eats the same thing every day. A peanut butter sandwich with the crust cut and a cup of applesauce. I'm allergic to peanuts. I still sit next to her, though. It's worth the hives.

She's probably the only person that talks to me. Not that she talks much. Halle is the only other fourth year resident that's as competitive as I am, but she's different. Sneaky, like a fox, or something.

Right now, I'm reading Captain America. And I sorta get him now. Saving lives makes me feel invincible, like I can do *whatever* I want. And I'm doing a good thing: people have lived and walked and breathed all because of me. Mr. A says that's it's bullshit, that we all die anyway, and half of the patients are diabetic sugar junkie idiots, but I don't care. That much, anyway.

"Where's Allen?" She asks, and it takes me a moment to remember who she's asking about. Mr. A said we needed some ground rules, hence the name. It's chill. He calls me David, or bitch, or asshole or others I would rather not repeat. It's a whole respect thing.

"I don't know. He usually wakes up super early, but, like, he wasn't there. He said he was going out last night, though."

"Has he texted you at all?" Halle says. This is the longest we've ever spoken. Her voice is like glass, so delicate and amber; I'm afraid I'll break it if I talk too loud, but I can't help yelling, because this is the first time she's ever looked me in the eye.

"Uh... no. I don't think so." My voice is soft. Not all fortissimo or whatever it's called. I'm a doctor, not a musician. I am *calm*. I am in control.

"I asked because Dr. Taylor said he would kick him from the Paulson surgery if he missed morning rounds again. You should call Allen. He likes you. Anyone else, he'll bite their head off." Halle smirks shyly. She looks like she belongs in Legend of Zelda or something. Her hair's all blonde, and she always smirks. Never smiles. It's like she has a secret melting in her mouth, like one of those breath mints you get from offices and front desks, and she'll never tell you what it is until it dissolves on her tongue, all melted sugar.

"I will. I totally will. Good idea." I grab my tray and pick up a fry. With the tip of it, I swirl ketchup around my paper plate.

"You don't think he would go missing?" And it's then my stomach drops. Because it fits. It makes sense.

It's like when you're watching a movie or something and all the pieces don't make sense, but then you talk it out, think about it, and all the sudden it makes sense. It's like when you see the symptoms of a patient in your head, and all the lines draw together, and become this simple equation that just is *right*.

He's missing. Mr. A is missing.

I dump my tray out and walk out of the hospital, my lab coat trailing behind me. It has ketchup on the sleeve.

- THREE DAYS

I go to the police station. The whole bus ride there I'm quiet and nervous and not myself. It's not good. I sit still and stare out the window.

They bring me coffee and a donut. Instead of the pink sprinkles, I pick the (frankly macabre) chocolate glazed. It fits my mood. I feel bad about being happy when he's not, when he could be dead or gone or anything, and we don't know. I don't know.

"So, you're his roommate. I'm Detective Walsh." The cop says. With a big, meaty arm, that is streaked with veins that are to die for (I could probably fit a 16mm in those if I needed to) he shakes my hand. "Nice to meet you."

"Hi. I'm David Mikaelson." I smile uncontrollably and watch as he flicks on the tape recorder.

"David. Tell me if he ever talked about disappearing... about wanting to get away. Was he ever suicidal?" He asks.

I have to pause for this one. "I don't think... so? He never said anything, like, he would say depressing things but not that. Homicidal ideation comes to mind." My voice is fragmented, becoming professional at one moment and childish at the next. It's like I can't decide if I'm holding on or letting go.

"Depressing things, as in?" He pushes. I watch as he nudges his glasses back on his nose. Nearsighted and left handed. Rare combo. Cool. I sigh deeply and drink my coffee.

"He would always say that what other people think about you doesn't matter as long as you like yourself. And that selfishness is a construct to make us feel bad about ourselves."

"He was a narcissist?" Detective Walsh doesn't get it.

"Kinda. But a good one."

"Oxymoron." He spits back.

"No, it's not. He's an ass, but he's a good person." How do you explain him? He's like the best worst person I've ever met. An enigma.

"Was he mentally ill?"

“No. He uh, smoked a lot of pot on weekends until we started getting drug tested. And he smokes, like, cigars. The old fashioned type.” He made me do it, once. Smoke pot. It was the worst thing ever. I ended up with a headache and felt so *low*. It was like I had nothing to be happy about.

“That’s not a mental illness. That’s drug use, which is concerning, considering his previous... activities.”

“Yeah.” I say, because what else can I tell him that will make him trust me? He’s waiting for me to slip, I can feel it. “He’s a good person, though, really. Just- please. I know he was probably a jerk to you or someone you know: a brother, a sister, a cousin, but he’s a genius, and jerks have friends too.” I push my chair in and leave.

I miss him already. Bastard.

- TWO WEEKS SINCE

My mother died when I was three. I don’t remember much besides the funeral and the doctors who tried to save her. They were so badass; with needles and syringes and tubes. It was amazing how everything was calculated. How if you did everything right, it would turn out the way you wanted it to. There was no uncertainty in medicine.

Then, my dad died when I was six. A shooting. I read through dictionaries and textbooks, trying to figure out how I could have saved him. I clipped out pictures of aortas and ventricles and blood cells. I moved to the US when I was seven, to a foster family.

And they’re cool. My mom. And my other mom. I mean, they’re awesome. Most foster families don’t adopt you. Most foster families don’t ever foster you when you’re a skinny kid from India who’s obsessed with the inner workings of humans and draws body parts with crayons.

It’s hard to explain, though. Feeling like you don’t belong. Being with Mr. A was different. He knew he didn’t belong. He was a middle-aged ex- drug dealer starting over. I was a chubby Indian kid who had framed anatomy pictures on the walls. We both didn’t fit in, and it was okay, because we didn’t have to try to be normal with each other.

Like, now, I scrub in for surgeries, and I have to smile and say “Thank you,” and “Yes, I hope they find him too.” and all those stupid things that mean nothing to me, because, yeah, *obviously*, I hope they find him. What kind of fucked up person wants their best friend to disappear?

At lunch or whenever I take a break, everyone just floats around me. They let me ramble when I know I’m rambling. They let me talk about bodily fluids while they’re eating. They tolerate me.

Today, when I was on call, and staying at the hospital, because the apartment is loath with cops and detectives, who all think he's worth none of their time, someone gave me a hug and a free coffee. For being so strong.

Ha. Haha. Yeah, so strong. He's *missing*. I sit on my couch and eat cheese puffs from an industrial sized barrel; I have it so hard. And you didn't even like him, you asshole Radiology nurse. Radiologists are all jerks who weren't smart enough to become actual doctors. Or at least Mr. A thought so.

The only people who are honest to me are Dr. Peters, this old guy oncologist who's tough and scary and threatens to rip out your teeth and use them for a necklace if you don't listen, and, of course, Halle.

"Buck up, kid." Dr. Peters says, passing me in the hall. His hair is graying. He's a skinny old guy. I could sit on him and he'd die. His blood sugar and cholesterol is probably off the charts, I think, because with old people, it always is. I'm scared of him though. "Not the end of the goddamn world."

"Oh-Thanks." I nod and smile, and go to my patient's room. She's pale but okay, a bit sick from her chemo meds. That's to be expected. The patient would be pretty, like Halle, if she wasn't a fragmented skeleton. This is the part of myself I hate. I can be a real asshole when I don't think.

Nervously, I shake my hands back and forth. And out of nowhere, she seizes up. I call for the paddles, and then it's go time, and they're against her skin, and then she's breathing again, all because of me, and usually, this is when I smile and start to feel better; invincible.

Except it doesn't happen. I feel like crap. I feel like a pop can after I squish it and tossed it in the garbage can.

Speaking of garbage cans, I go and throw up in one right after.

- A MONTH LATER

In the middle of the night, I get a call.

"It's Detective Walsh. Am I speaking to David?"

"Yeah. Did you..." I say. I reach for the bottle of water that's been on my nightstand since I moved in and take a big sip.

"I have some... some exciting news, David."

"We found a shoe. On the highway. DNA testing says it's his."

"A shoe?" A shoe. They found a shoe. This asshole called me at three in the morning, actually made me think for a second that I had hope, that he was alive and well, just hungover, and it's a shoe. "I'm not an

idiot. I know you pulled my medical records. I know you did, because I fucking Googled it, you fucking... you fucking asshole.”

“I think you’re getting a bit out of hand, David. We’re both professionals.” Walsh tries, but it’s no use. I see red, which I always thought was a stereotype, like the sort of thing that’s in comic books, right before the villain goes up against the good guys, but it’s not. I legitimately see red.

“No we’re not. You’re not. You’re being prejudiced.” I can’t stop myself. Mr. A, I think blithely, would be proud. I’ve never been much of a cusser, but I guess people change. “You think I don’t know anything because I’m autistic, huh? That’s what my file said, and, *and* you think he’s in a ditch somewhere, *dead*, because of some drug deal gone wrong. Yeah, don’t act like you don’t know.”

“I’m sorry that you feel that way. I was just going to say that there was blood found in the shoe belonging to him. Have a good night, David.” The phone clicks, and I throw it against the wall. Jesus. I feel so mad at myself. For being reckless and stupid and careless just because it’s the only thing that makes me feel better about my sorry ass. I feel mad at Mr. A. I always thought of him as Captain America. He was unbreakable. He could get knocked down ten times and get back up ten. And yeah, he was mean to me. I was mean to him. I took long showers and used his shampoo and ate his leftovers sometimes, and never let him borrow my textbooks and sometimes I went into his bedroom and found the knife someone had stabbed him with a long time ago and held it in my hands and felt this empty feeling in my chest, where my heart was supposed to be.

- TWO MONTH SINCE

There’s a scheduling morning the first Monday of every month, and I usually go because my attending, Dr. Taylor doesn’t enjoy my company. Also for the free breakfast.

I go, and I always take the best shifts for Dr. Taylor, no 36’s or weekenders. I like people liking me. Who would ever want to be hated? Mr. A did. He was weird- he is weird, I correct myself, because he is Shrodinger’s human being, both dead and alive until proven otherwise- like that. He would say things just to make people squirm. Just to try and set them off, to push their buttons and see what made them went away. He once said that the problem with me was that I was like a tumor that managed to wrap itself around a litany of vital organs: I was here to stay, like some sort of a human barnacle.

“Hey, David. Did they say anything about him?” Halle says, one day, after a lengthy twenty four hour shift. “About Allen, or Mr. A, like you call him?”

“No. I mean, they found a shoe on the highway, but it’s kind of a dead end, y’know. Like, it’s probably right, I mean, not to assume that he’s going to be okay, because he probably won’t be fine, so I’m not hoping for anything.” I stutter out, and then try to awkwardly smile. It doesn’t work. I feel as if my cheekbones are emulating my inner sad clown.

“Oh. Okay.” Halle shuts her locker, and it’s then that I see the photo frames that are stuck to the scratched blue metal. She probably has a family. A life. Better things to do than worry about some wanna-be doctor that still hasn’t quite given up hope about his misanthropic best friend that no one liked when he was alive, anyway. “Um, I was wondering if you’re free this Friday.”

Friday, two months since he’s gone missing. What if he comes back? I can’t keep sitting vigil. I can’t give up on him, either. “Yeah. Sure, I would love to.”

“Good, dinner is at seven. You don’t need to bring anything.” Halle replies. She smirks at me- so prettily!- and I feel like genuinely smiling for the first time since he left.

“So, is this like a date, or whatever? Should I bring wine? I don’t drink, but…” I stick out my fingers in some awkward basterization of what’s supposed to be finger guns. It’s then I feel the silence in the room. The air is frozen. She begins to talk, and then I see her bite her tongue. God. I always manage to screw these stupid romantic things up. “Oh- Okay. God. I didn’t mean it that way

The only romantic relationship I’ve ever had, much to Mr. A’s chagrin, was three simultaneous girlfriends in junior year of high school. Lots of girlfriends. Lots of dates. And then suddenly no girlfriends at all.

“I have a girlfriend. Um, but the wine sounds good.” I watch as she holds back a smirk, her cheeks dimpling, and I have to hold back maniacal laughter, because, God, this is the type of thing that just happens to me. Seriously.

“I meant it as like, a friend date. Like, as in, we’re part- Not that. But I guess it’s just an expression, and I mean, it’s not like monogamy is *really* all that exciting; did you know that more than thirty-nine percent of couples expressed a desire-”

“Stop. Please, just… it’s okay. It’s okay. How could you have known? I just thought you were… y’know, with Allen. Like you would understand.” Her face is bright red. My face is bright red.

“Y-you… seriously?” I’m laughing now, and it’s uncontrollable. Hot tears run down the side of my face. This is- this is just my luck. The literal girl of my dreams is gay, gay! Apparently she thought I was too! And I can’t even just say “Sure, thanks, I’d love to go,” I have to do finger guns and ask her out. It’s hilarious. It’s the story of my fucking life.

“Oh my god, you aren’t?” She looks shocked.

“No. No, he is- he was my best friend. Not in like, a life partner way.” I throw the contents of my locker into my backpack. Oh God, could this get any worse? “No offence. And, uh, actually, I think I have something on Friday… a youth group meeting, youth group, that’s it! So, uh, I won’t be able to go. Sorry?”

“No, it’s fine. Totally. I get it. See you next shift, okay?” She leaves, then, shutting the door softly behind her. It’s then I wish he was there to tell me what to do, or something. At least to make fun of me. I never had siblings. My parents only wanted one. There was no older brother to argue with and to protect me- at least, that’s what I think they do.

I just want him back. I want a lot of things: a fellowship in the Cardio unit at this hospital; my bio parents, alive; I want her to love me. Most of all, though, I want him back.

- THREE MONTHS SINCE

It’s always been weird to me: the fact that other people have normal families. I mean, my mom and my other mom and their two rabid Corgis are all very happy, they go shopping at Costco every Tuesday night and watch the Food Network in their spare time, but they’re not entirely considered regular. My dead set of parents were very normal, too. I think they were, which doesn’t happen often. I like to pretend that it- the shooting and the cancer- never occurred.

Mr. A’s parents are old. Correction. They are super freakin’ old, like the type that should be six foot under the ground instead of six feet tall, not even hunched over or anything. His dad hauls around an oxygen tank, and unplugs it when he goes outside to smoke. I use my asthma inhaler three times in the length of their visit. His mom is sweet. She brings me peanut butter cookies, which I eat and have to hide my hives from, and flowers, which I put next to my stack of GTA games, all the while trying to obscure the nudity on the covers of them.

“I don’t know what we’ll do, honey.” His mother says to me as she leaves. Her name is Anne, but I still call her Mrs. Christopher. It’s weird to think that Mr. A has a last name. It’s like when you’re a kid and you think your teachers never go home; they just stay at school. “You’re so strong, though. He was lucky to have you. Very, very lucky. Bless your heart.”

“Thank you,” I say, awkwardly, and then grab her coat for her. Suddenly, a new worry springs up in my head. What if he’s alive and totally freezing his ass off? He never wore a coat. I don’t even think he owned one.

“He got what he was coming for him. I didn’t expect much more.” His dad says, and coughs so harshly that I debate taking him to work with me. “That boy was always trouble.”

“Harold!” Anne says, and she grabs her cane in frustration, the type that comes with knowing someone for half a century. Even though I’m twenty-eight, I think I can understand what that feels like.

“Well, it’s true.” Harold replies. He shakes my hand harshly, and fixes his eyes on mine. “He never had a goddamned good thing to say about anyone when he called. ‘Cept for you.” With that, he leaves, stiffly holding open the door for his wife with a cigarette askew on his lips, blowing smoke into my smoke-free apartment. I don’t say anything. I lie down in my bed for what feels like forever. I feel sick.

- SIX MONTHS

The lease is up.

“Are you selling his furniture?” His mom asks, on one of our Sunday phone calls. I take a minute to finish eating my cereal before replying. “I can always fly down and help you; our Allen was so messy. Boys usually are.”

I am not letting an old woman come into my house and ruin the delicate arrangement of it. No. I haven’t even opened his door since he disappeared, besides the time the cops came over. “It’s fine. I can put his stuff in one of those storage pods, or something.”

I open the door to his room and I feel like crying. The eagle feather on the wall is still there. The walls are still dark brown, the most boring colour ever. Everything is in its place. There’s still laundry scattered on the floor, a half-drunken beer and a palisade of fruit flies around the rim of it. It’s a time capsule.

I hold my breath as I walk in, trying to savour the moment. His record player- what an old man, I think, forlornly- is still in the corner. I turn it on, and it starts playing some random song. It’s slow, but a good slow.

My phone is in my pocket. I rub my hand over it and consider what I’m about to do for a second. Am I an idiot? Yes. But it’s all I’ve got left. I lie back on his bed and smell the crisp sheets.

With shaky hands, I dial the familiar number.

“Hi,” The landlord picks up. “I was wondering about extending the lease for another year... yeah, or until he gets back.”

Some things never change.

- A YEAR.

Life is... life is good. It has Mr. A sized holes everywhere, and yeah, sometimes I don’t wanna get out of bed, but it’s okay. I ended up going over to Halle’s for dinner. We’re what you could call friends, now. Dr. Taylor still tolerates me. People still smile pityingly at me in the hallway. Dr. Peters pats me on the back occasionally and calls me ‘bucko’ and ‘kiddo’ and I try not to smile. I have a fellowship in cardiology starting this April. Things are okay. Fine. Good.

The cops haven't called. Which is okay, I meant, no news is good news. Right? Today, though, eleven months, six days, and approximately fourteen hours since I called the police- it's not like I keep track, or anything- my phone screen lights up.

It's them. It's Detective Walsh, who is saved as *Detective Assface* in my phone.

(He would be proud.)

I sit up from the on call bed. And take a deep breath. My scrubs have changed from light intern blue to a deep navy. I have the scratchy beginning of a beard on my chin. I'm so different. A year can do a lot to a person.

"Is this David? Can we speak?" Detective Walsh asks. "It's Detective Walsh." He says, like I'm an idiot.

"Yeah. It's me." My heart is beating so fast. I'm so scared, even though I'm trying not to be. I'm trying to hold on. I'm trying to be unbreakable, like a superhero or something.

"We found him. He's-" Detective Walsh begins, and I can't help myself. I cut him off.

"Is he okay? Is he- is he alive?"

"Yes, but-"

"He's at my hospital, right?" I run downstairs to the ER. I probably look crazy; my scrubs are flying off of me, and I have the worst bedhead. It doesn't matter. What matters is that he's alive.

Through the phone, as I run rampantly down the last flight of stairs, out of breath, I hear the broken words: "He's... brain damage... subdural... asking for a David..."

And then I see him. In a curtained off section, surrounded by police officers and other attendings, all running around, trying to save him. I hear the monitors beep continuously- thank God the rhythm is normal.

"Mr. A!" I yell. I push back the people surrounding the gurney. He's not Mr. A, though. This man is thin; his eyes are hollow and his cheekbones cutting. He is anemically pale, and his chest rises unevenly, sometimes punctuated by heaving coughs.

"David?" He replies.

I wrap my arms around his neck and feel tears streaming down my cheeks, but I don't care anymore. He's back. I was right. He's back.

"You *idiot*." I whisper, and everything is better. I don't let go of him. I'm holding on.