

Not Okay

By Liam Moroz, grade 9

I walked into the math classroom, barely stopping my nervousness from showing. I had studied for this test for hours yesterday, going over everything the current unit had to offer. I really hoped I could do this. Seeing my uneasiness, my friend, Victor, came over to me while I was walking to my desk.

“Hey, Carnig, you doing okay?” He asked, whispering so the teacher, Mr. Nicolas, wouldn’t hear.

“Yeah, I’m okay.” I whispered, my anxiety and fear creeping into my voice, making it sound more like a whimper. “I’ll... I’ll be fine.” I whispered without any confidence.

“Are you sure?” Victor pressed. “You look like you’re about to collapse.”

Victor had always had a knack for reading body language, especially mine, and he used that talent to its fullest when I was nervous. He wanted to become a psychologist when he grew up, so I suppose he considered this practice.

“I’m fine.” I insisted. “Just had a bad sleep, that’s all.” I had laid awake with worry for about two hours last night, my sleep schedule had been suffering, and it was probably showing in my appearance.

“It’s just, you look like you’re about to fall asleep—”

“I’m fine!” I growled, my tone hardening as I tried to keep my voice down. “And you constantly asking if I’m okay isn’t helping!”

“Okay, okay, sorry.” Victor apologized. “Good luck on the test.”

“Same to you.” I said as we walked to our desks, which were on opposite sides of the classroom.

“Good morning everyone!” Mr. Nicolas shouted. “Unit test today, and I hope you studied for this one, because it’s not easy!” He said this with compassion in his voice. He was loud and intimidating, but underneath that, he was genuinely invested in his students’ success.

I tried in vain to keep my nerves hidden, but failed to suppress a small shudder. Luckily, I doubt anyone noticed. My doubt was confirmed when I glanced around the classroom and saw similar signs of disquiet in many of the other students. Mr. Nicolas had a tendency to inspire nervousness on test days, both with his tests being notoriously difficult, and his famous no-retake, no extra time policy. Thus, his tests were infamous around the school.

Mr. Nicolas began passing out the tests. When I received mine, I took a deep breath to steel my nerves and began the test.

Mr. Nicolas’s tests are always organized the same way, getting progressively harder, and this one was no exception. There were 31 questions, and 31 points. I began breezing through the first half of the questions, which was expected, but hit a roadblock at question 17, which asked

me to solve a complex equation using two different strategies. After trying and failing to do it a few different ways, my nerves began to get the best of me, and I began to panic.

My ears were ringing and I could feel my face starting to flush. I desperately tried to calm myself down, but every time I got close I found myself thinking about the time I had to do the test dwindling or about how mad my mother would be if I failed the test.

Finally, I angrily sliced a shiny dark line through the question and flipped the page. I saw that I understood the next question and started it. Unfortunately, I'd wasted so much time that there were only 25 minutes left in the period. I did my best to finish as many questions as possible, but still ended up handing the test in with six questions untouched. I left dejected.

After the bell rang to end the day, I approached Mr. Nicolas while he was at his desk. As I was walking to his desk, I heard him muttering about his bills.

"I hate living in Utah." He complained to himself. "The bills here are the—oh." He said, realizing I was there. "Carnig, what can I do for you?" He asked.

"I was wondering if I could get a retake of the test we did today." I said.

"I'm afraid not, you know the rules." He said with an apologetic tone. "I gave you more than enough time to finish it". He handed me my test, I took it without looking at it, then began to turn away.

"One more thing, I noticed that you looked almost..." He hesitated, "scared, during the test. Is everything okay?"

"Yes, I'm fine." I responded, walking out of the classroom.

I began walking to my locker, and when I got there, I saw Victor waiting for me.

"Hey, Carnig." He said. "Are you okay? You look sorta... downtrodden."

I contemplated getting mad at him for asking if I was okay again, but decided to let it slide.

"Yeah." I said. "The test just took a lot out of me, that's all."

"Speaking of which, how did you do on it?" Victor asked.

I glanced down at the test. 77%, it read. I sighed in relief. This was a much better mark than I had expected.

"I did fine, not too good, not too bad." I said. "By the way," I continued. "Why did you wait for me?"

"Oh, debate club is starting a bit late and I had nothing to do," he said. "So I thought I'd see what you were up to."

While he was talking, I had packed up to leave. We said our goodbyes and I went to walk home.

It had recently rained, and puddles dotted the sidewalk. While I was walking, I stopped to examine myself in a particularly large one.

"Damn." I said to myself as I saw my reflection. "I look hideous." My brown hair was disheveled and untamed, and I had large bags under my eyes. I was surprised anyone was able to stand looking at me today.

While I continued walking, I noticed the lack of anyone else walking home.

“I suppose people hate cloudy days that much.” I muttered to myself.

I felt a raindrop on my head. “And I suppose people hate rain even more.” I said, picking up my pace. Luckily, my house was close by, and I managed to get there without getting entirely soaked.

I went inside, and immediately regretted it when I saw the bottle of wine sitting on the kitchen counter. It meant that I should get away now, before she saw me.

I tried to silently walk back outside, but I saw her walking out of the living room toward me and knew it was too late to escape.

I just had to suffer through it.

“Carnig! You’re home!” She bellowed, much louder than she needed to. “How’s my Lamb doing?” Carnig was my grandfather’s name, it meant “gentle lamb” hence the nickname. I hated it, but she called me that anyway. “Did you do well on the test?”

“Yes, Mom” I mumbled, my voice quivering. My mother was a very tall woman, had medium length brown hair that bounced when she walked. She was also very thin, in spite of her drinking.

“Let’s see it, then.” She ordered, walking into the kitchen and beckoning me to follow.

I followed her. The kitchen was a mess, as usual. Most of the drawers and cabinets were open to some degree, the trash can was full to bursting, on the counter there was a large knife placed next to an abandoned, partially cut up steak and several sloppily chopped carrots. It was clear that she’d tried to prepare a meal but gave up halfway through. But the most notable and frightening thing I saw were the four empty bottles of wine scattered about the room. She had started drinking a year ago when my father died in a car accident, slowly at first but almost constantly in the past few weeks.

She sat down at the kitchen table, in the chair with its back to the living room. I sat in the one with its back to the kitchen counter.

“Go on, take it out” her speech slurred as she talked.

The moment I took it out of my backpack, she ripped it from my hands to examine it.

“Seventy-seven percent? Really? I expected much more from you, Carnig.” Her face looked like a combination of disappointment and incredulousness.

Just keep talking, I thought. I’ll be fine as long as she just keeps talking.

“Why didn’t you study longer? Why’d you fail? What’s wrong with you?”

I had seen her go down this path before. I needed to get out.

Her hands clenched into fists, her expression changed to one of fury and she stood up.

“How could I have raised a child so stupid!?” She screamed in my face.

She raised her hand and I recoiled.

“That’s what I thought.” She said with a smug look on her face. “Now do better or this’ll be a lot worse.” She turned to walk away.

“Maybe you’re the reason I’m not doing good” I muttered to her back.

I only knew I’d been slapped when I felt the stinging pain across my face. I felt myself fall out of my chair and looked up to see her winding up for another slap. I raised both my arms

in front of my face in an attempt to protect myself and felt the pain across my forearm. I was protecting myself, but I was also being pushed back against the counter. I knew that I wouldn't be able to escape her if I didn't do something now.

"Lamb, I'm doing this for your own good." She said, lowering her hand. "You don't know it yet, but I'm helping you. Just trust—"

"HOW!?" I screamed, my fear suddenly morphing into rage. "How is THIS helping me!? You have made me live in fear of you for a year! I have dreaded your rages and you say that you're helping me!? How could this help—"

"Shut up!" She hissed. She had been taken aback at first, but she had quickly returned to being enraged. "How dare you interrupt me? I am your MOTHER! I demand respect from you, child!"

"I respected you until you hit me."

She was momentarily startled by this, but her face contorted back into one of rage.

"You inflicted this on yourself!" She screamed and swung again. I protected myself with my arms again and lowered them just in time to see her sending a punch at me. It caught me squarely in the forehead and knocked me back against the counter.

Knowing that she was actually trying to seriously hurt me sent me into a state of panic. I shoved her away and quickly looked around for anything I could use to defend myself. I spotted the serrated knife behind me and grabbed it right before she aimed another punch at me. Fortunately, she missed her mark, but was still coming at me. In a panic, I blindly thrust the knife forward.

She looked in surprise at her chest. The knife was sticking out right where her lungs were.

"W-what?" She cried. Looking bewildered. She stared at the knife before ripping it out, causing blood to start pouring from the wound, and collapsing a moment later. I knelt and tried to cover the wound, but only succeeded in covering my hands with her blood. I was terrified.

I grabbed my phone from my backpack and frantically dialed 911.

"Hello, 911, what is your emergency?" The operator said.

"Help, my mom's bleeding out!" I yelled into the phone.

"Where are you?"

"48 museum crescent."

"Is anyone else hurt?"

"No, just her."

"Okay, paramedics are on the way, should be there in a few minutes. Please stay on the line—"

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw my mother shift and dropped the phone. I rushed to my mother's side.

She looked confused and seemed to be unable to talk, and her breathing was shallow.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to, you don't deserve this." My eyes were tearing up, and I found myself fearing for her life.

My sorrow was interrupted by a loud knock on the door and I knew the paramedics were here. I ran to let them in and they rushed to her body. One of the paramedics, a woman with blonde hair tied in a ponytail, began applying pressure to my mother's wound, stopping some of the blood from flowing out. While she was doing that, the other one, a tall man with a short beard, prepared a stretcher to carry her to the ambulance. After some time, they loaded her onto the stretcher and left for the hospital.

I was sitting on the couch, numb, when I heard someone walk in through the open door. A moment later, a police officer walked into the living room. Her hair was tied in a neat bun and she had a stern expression on her face.

She saw me and walked over to the couch, but stayed standing.

"Excuse me," she said. "Carnig, is it?" I nodded my head. "My name is Officer Ivory and I have a few questions I'd like to ask you. Are you okay with that?" Her tone was very formal and businesslike. I nodded my head. "Okay. First question, were you in the house when your mother was attacked?" I nodded. "Answer orally, please." She said.

"Yes, I was in the house." I said.

"Okay, second question, do you know—"

"Will she be okay?" I asked, interrupting her.

Her voice lost its formal tone and became more sympathetic. "I don't know, she lost a lot of blood and she was hardly breathing, according to the paramedics. Let's just hope for the best, okay?" I nodded. "Now, back to the question at hand." Her voice remained sympathetic. "Do you know who stabbed her?"

I was suddenly overwhelmed with sorrow and guilt. I lurched forward and my eyes filled with tears.

"Hey, are you okay?" Officer Ivory asked, sounding worried.

I looked down at my blood-stained hands, and one thing was certain to me. I was not okay. I was never okay.