

## Voicemail

Dad

cell

May 3 at 7:33 PM

Transcription Beta

“Guess who’s getting ready to come home and take you to Ivy Springs? That’s right, Ima. It’s happening. It’s finally happening. Don’t tell Nell. I want to surprise her.”



Speaker

Call Back

Delete

## Email Draft (Unsent)

New Message



To

Subject

I'm holding my breath

Until you're standing in front of me

Because we've danced this song

So many times before

And I no longer trust  
You'll do what you  
Promise.  
Just in case,  
I'll count the hexagons.

## NAIMA

Nell is a dingy yoga mat; the sweaty barrier between total chill-status and my shit reality (aka, my annoying stepmom and ruiner of all moments) (trust me on this).

"JJ and Kam aren't going to believe how much you've grown since the funeral," she says on our long-ass 794-mile drive from Albany, Georgia, to Ivy Springs, Indiana. She *tap tap taps* her long, pointed fingernails against the steering wheel to the beat of whatever imaginary song she's playing in her head. Probably something disco or hair band. The radio is silent, always silent, when we ride together, but the second she speaks with that high-pitched nasally voice I loathe, I regret this necessity. I concentrate harder on the objects we pass so I can properly pinch my toes between them.

Tap my nose. Tap my nose. Tap my nose.

Tap my nose. Tap my nose.

Tap my nose.

Click my tongue. Click my tongue. Click my tongue.

Click my tongue. Click my tongue.

Click my tongue.

Flick my thumbnail. Flick my thumbnail.

Flick my thumbnail.

Flick my thumbnail. Flick my thumbnail.

Flick my thumbnail.

Flick.

Flick.

FLICK.

I continue with my sequence the length of the drive. Nell hates it, but I hate when she wears fingerless gloves in the summer, so we're even. Without my boring-ass stepbrother, Christian, to be my talk block – the dull cushion of conversation between Nell and me – (he left two days ago on a death star/plane to see his dad in NYC), the “spacious” SUV feels like I've been placed at a dinner table in a vast canyon and right across from me is literally the *only* woman I don't want to meet for dinner. Like, why can't I eat with the Queen of England or Oprah? I'm bound by my father's love for Nell, or whatever, but now he's gone, and I'm climbing the hell out of the canyon before she wants to talk about how big my naturally tousled hair is (a perfect mess), period cycles (semi-regular, FYI), sexually transmitted diseases (don't have a single one, thanks), or worse – my feelings (happily buried!). *Ugh. GTFO.*

The failing engine's hum, where the metal scrapes and churns with a whir, competes with Nell's increased tapping. I've missed too many objects, my toes rapidly pinching and releasing, to make up for what's been lost. But it's too late. My mind shifts automatically to a neon sign flashing warning! There's always a consequence to messing up the sequence. *Always.*

Counting is to time what the final voicemail Dad left is to the sound of my heart cracking open; a message I can't listen to. It'll become entombed in history, in me. My finger lingers over my phone and quickly retreats, knowing there's nothing he could've said to make this pain less. Nothing can make him less gone.

I look out the window to where my dreary-eyed reflection stares blankly back at me; Nell glides over the double yellow lines into oncoming traffic, violently overcorrecting just before we would have been hit by a semi. The sound of his horn echoes

through the high-topped Tennessee mountains. Three thousand two hundred eighty-seven people die in car accidents every day. I Googled it. After I Googled it, I looked at pictures. And after I looked at pictures I went through the sequence. Car accident. Fatalities. My legs smashed up to my chest. Nell crushed into the hood.

"Sorry," she says; her voice rattles. "Make sure Ray's okay back there."

I turn to investigate the vase-shaped metal urn surrounded by layers of sloppily folded sheets (Nell did that) and one perfectly situated hexagon quilt (that's all me). The sun's gleam hits *U.S. Marine Corp* just so, and I'm reminded again that he's gone. *Gone.*

"It's fine," I say, refusing to call that pile of ashes "Dad," or "he." The urn arrived several days ago in a twenty-four-hour priority package. Nell saying, "No reason to waste time getting him home," and I was like, "What's *that*?" and she was all "Your dad, silly," and I was like, "Huh?" and she asked me if I wanted a banana-kale protein shake after she "got him situated." A big *hell no*. I immediately dove into a Ziploc ration of Lucky Charms marshmallows to dull the pain of conversing with someone so exhausting.

After he was transported in ice from Afghanistan to Dover, after they sorted and processed his things, after he was cremated, after the police and state troopers closed down the streets to honor him as we drove him through, after we had the memorial service, after we were handed the folded flag with a bullet shell casing tucked inside, after they spoke of his medals, and after Christian and I sat in disbelief beneath a weeping willow tree for three hours, Nell finally decided the ashes *should* go to his hometown in Indiana, after all. I didn't think she'd cave, but after one talk with my grandma, JJ, she did. If anyone could turn a donkey into a unicorn, it's JJ (or so she says). And so, it was decided — Dad, I mean *It*, was going home a unicorn.

"Let's stop for some grub," Nell says, wide-eyed. "Hungry?"

"Grub," rhymes with "nub," which she is. "No."

"Let's at least stretch our legs. Still a few hours to go."

"Fine. But no travel yoga this time."

She pulls off to a rest area a few miles ahead, exiting the car. I crack a window and wait while she hikes a leg to the top of the trunk, bending forward with an "oh, that's tight." After, she says, "Going to the potty. BRB."

I flash a thumbs-up and slink deep into the warmth of my seat, hiding from the stare of perverts and families. My foot kicks my bag on the floor mat, knocking my prescription bottle to its side. Dr. Rose, my therapist in Ft. Hood, said sometimes starting over is the only way to stop looking back. But what about when the past is all you have left of someone?

My gaze pushes forward to the vending machines. Dad and I stopped at this very place on *our* way to Indiana *without* basic Nell. He'd grab a cold can of Coke and toss me a bag of trail mix to sort into piles. If I close my eyes, it *almost* feels like he's here – not a pile of ashes buckled tight into the backseat. We'd play a game of Would You Rather to see who could come up with the worst/most messed-up scenarios (I usually won).

*Would you rather wear Nell's unwashed yoga pants every day for a month?*

*Or call an urn full of ashes "Dad"?*

Sometimes, he'd pre-sort the trail mix,

Leaving me the best parts (the candy-coated chocolate).

I am one-of-a-kind

*Magic*, Dad would say.

But he was, too.

*A unicorn*, I think.

*Definitely* not a donkey.

The more I think on it,

Maybe JJ could turn Nell

Into a unicorn,  
Too,  
But *no* magic is that strong.

## Voicemail

Dad

cell

June 1 at 9:04 AM

Transcription Beta

“Open the door.”



Speaker

Call Back

Delete

## Sent Email

No Subject

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**Naima** <naimatheriveter@gmail.com> Jun 1, 9:07 AM  
to Dad

If I open it,  
Will you really be there  
Or just a memory  
From the last time?  
Nevermind.

I see you,  
The ghost  
Outside my window.  
<3

⏪ ⏩ ⏮ ⏭ ■ ● DEW GD BRICKMAN  
DURATION: 10:49

*In today's forecast, sunshine early morning will give way to late-day thunderstorms. I love the smell of rain. It's the aroma of being alive.*

August Moon and the Paper Hearts – the band my parents opened for – advise we speak kindly to strangers through song. I'd like to think that's what my parents would've said, too. I can still see my mother's chestnut eyes soft as she hums. From the tired bones in her feet after long shifts at the glass-making factory (after the band split apart), to the graying curls that sprang into action when the beat hit her ears, she's frozen in time; a whimsical ballerina, twirling inside a glass globe to a tune only she and I can hear.

"Let the music move your soul," she'd tell me. "Let it carry you into the clouds, my darling."

She'd grab my hand, hers papered by the rough gloves she was required to wear during her shifts, guiding me by the glittering moon dust, while Dad watched on from the old twill rocker, threads carved around his boxy frame. Our feet stepped along invisible squares against the floor, round and round, until the world vanished beneath us. We floated.

"You got that boy spoiled, Momma," Dad would tell her.

"Don't you know it," she'd reply, pulling me closer.

That was when the universe built itself around the three of us; vibrant wildflowers, dipped in my mother's favorite verb: "love." I wish I could remember the smell of her better. I wish I could remember what Dad would say. When I lose my breath in the thick of human oceans and panic, I wish harder.

My second set of parents, Stella and Thomas, are kind to me. Stella's eyes remind me of my mother's — two infinity pools, giving the illusion of boundless compassion — while Thomas's laugh is an eerily mirrored version of my father's. Sometimes, when Thomas finds himself amused, I catch myself thinking Dad is here. I can almost see him holding his bass guitar, doubled over from a joke he'd heard.

My sister, Faith, hasn't settled into this family yet, even after a year of fostering. She cries, punches her bed pillow — sometimes Stella; sometimes Thomas. Her wailing is incessant, scratchy, and raw. Sometimes I sit outside her door and silently cry with her. When you're taken from your birth parents, it doesn't matter how wonderful your new, adoptive, or temporary, foster parents are. They can be every warm hug you've needed, but if you're holding tight to the feeling of being *home*, you may find comfort in the cold, dark night instead. I did at first. After all the months with us, Faith is realizing the Brickmans *are* her *home* now, but she's still fighting to stay warm on her own, hoping her parents would somehow return.

"You can never know someone's pain or happiness until you've stepped inside their shoes," my mother would say.

"What if their shoes don't fit?" I'd ask. "If our lives are too different?"

"Find a connection; something similar enough that all the differences bounce off the table completely, like Ping-Pong balls. If we look past things that divide us, humanity will find a way to shine through."

No one should step inside my shoes unless they're prepared to understand the kind of grief that's whole-body and constant. It's quiet but deep. The same way Earth orbits the sun every



hour of every day of every year, I miss my parents, and Faith misses hers.

Stella and Thomas try. They've searched our shoe collection. They've tried them on. And, just as Cinderella found her magic fit, they've managed to find a pair that fits in some way. Of the hundreds of thousands of kids in foster care, they placed an inquiry about me, they went through the classes and orientation for me, they did the home study for me – they adopted *me*. Same for Faith, however different our circumstances.

It makes no matter that Stella and Thomas couldn't conceive naturally. The foster and adoption process stole chunks of time they'll never retrieve, for a "special needs" boy – due to my age, "minority group," and "emotional trauma" – long past diapers and bottles and baby powder-scented snuggles. It was financially and emotionally draining for all of us involved, with no guarantee I would welcome them or they could love me the way my parents did. I didn't embrace them at first. I quite liked my previous foster family but they felt me only temporary. The Brickmans embraced me without hesitation, with a permanent kind of promise. It's the same kindness my parents would endorse. They gave me a home, a family, and a place I belong. And so, to every stranger along my path, I will be kind, too. Even – *especially* – the ones who'd prefer I didn't.

"Those are the souls who need compassion most," Mom would say. "The ones broken by the world, angry and afraid of trusting. You must remind them that they are not alone. Nothing can be lost in trying. Remember that always, my darling."

As I hear Faith shouting into her comforter again, I wonder how many have failed to try on her shoes through the near dozen foster homes she's been in.

*I hear you, Faith.*

*I am you.*

I think all this before my pre-planned path to Baked & Caffeinated – the coffee and bakeshop at which I've been employed a mere six days – with August Moon streaming through

my earbuds. Today is my first scheduled shift, and if you could feel my heart beat, you'd assume it was about to burst (it very well may). Though Ivy Springs maintains a compact three-mile radius, it's my first time walking alone. For most, it's a relaxing walk. But, as my father would often tell me, I am not most people. The mere thought of the journey had me curled in a ball on my twin mattress for at least an hour. Beneath the covers, I gave my best, most inspiring pep talk about how, despite those voices telling me I can't do it, I can and I will and I'll be glorious.

Mom would always lift the blankets off the bed and sit next to me. "This, too, shall pass, my darling."

"And if it doesn't?" I'd say with quivering lips.

"It will. You are my corpse flower," Mom told me. "The largest, rarest flower in the whole world. Blooming takes many arduous seasons, but it is worth the wait."

The longer she's gone, the more I understand the layers she peeled off of me. With each one, my shine radiated a little more. Mom and Dad never saw my fears in black and white; people aren't made so simply. We're straddling a blur of gray.

The downtown café is fairly new to this small blip of town. Serving variations of roasted coffee beans, espresso concoctions, and freshly baked confectionaries you can smell from miles, Baked & Caffeinated is one of the few places people my age come. With school out for summer, the position of highly regarded cashier is a way to blend in slightly more than I stand out. When the manager, Liam "Big Foot" Thompson – college student and "organic medicinal specialist" (whatever that means) – barely glanced at the application I spent two long hours filling in, I'm not sure what prompted him to hire me on the spot, but there it was: an opportunity to slide into a new pair of shoes.

"Hard work reveals who people really are," Dad would tell me. "When the going gets tough, some hide and others rise."

*I will rise, Dad.*

One glance at the clock and I see no matter how I rush, the seconds tick by faster than I can keep up. I'm dressed in freshly

ironed slacks, an ebony polo buttoned two-thirds of the way up (I was told this is appropriate), snazzy checkered suspenders, and the taupe fedora — feather and all — *I cannot* live without.

“I’m off,” I tell Stella.

She sits at the kitchen table, a list of recipe ingredients in hand, peering over the bridge of her reading glasses. She pulls a ceramic coffee mug to her lips and sips her coffee with a slurp. It dribbles to the paper. “Ah, damn it!”

I step back, my hands gripping my suspenders as if they’re bungee cords.

“Sorry,” she says, standing. She squares her shoulders with mine and drives her stare through me. “I hope you have the best time.” She pulls me near — an attempt at a hug that’s strangled by her awkward, coffee-saturated positioning. “If you feel overwhelmed, take a deep breath, excuse yourself to the bathroom if necessary, and you can always, *always* call me. K?”

I hesitate, fear squirming between us.

She tips my chin up so my eyes fall straight into hers. Her eyes swallow me up in a bubble of safety, little lines spiderwebbing out from the corner creases that cling to my distress, fishing fear out of me, casting it somewhere else entirely. It’s a trick Mom used to do, too.

“You’re going to do great,” she reassures. “Promise.”

I nod, finally, and she releases me from her grip to deal with the coffee puddle. I watch her for a whole minute before she urges me out the door. I’m supposed to work on my time management. I lose time when my brain is knotted with worry. But how do you untangle something you can’t even see?

Along my walk down the potholed sidewalk, my eyes carefully plot each step to not catch on a divot. The last time, I nearly broke my arm, the exact spot ridiculing me as I pounce over it with the light-footed pirouette of a cat. I’m so proud of this move, distracted by my obvious victory against that mean concrete hole, I run straight into someone.

“Oh, I’m so sorry,” I stammer.

"Dude," a boy says with a heavy grunt. "Watch it."

I'm hesitant to make eye contact, but I do — Stella and Thomas have encouraged it — alarm bells blaring. The boy's eyes are narrow, brows furrowed. I replay last night's news headline in my mind — teen shoots former classmate at graduation party — and fold as far down as my small frame will allow.

He rips his earbuds out, his face softening only slightly. I try to walk by, he blocks me. I move to the other side. He stands in my way here, too.

"Excuse me," I say.

"You should watch where you're going. It's a small town with shitty sidewalks."

"Yes," I stutter. "I will, thank you for the advice."

He presses his earbuds back into place and allows me to pass with the wave of his hand.

"Have a wonderful day," I tell him. My voice shakes, my feet moving faster than before.

Mom would say, "Chin up, eyes forward, not back," so I repeat this to myself, pretending she's here to ricochet these interactions into outer space. I'm still learning how to be my own hero. My deepest darkest fear is, maybe I never will.

I stand outside the bakeshop and stare up at the illustrated coffee mug on the sign. My reluctance holds me in the center of this busier than normal sidewalk. I remind myself I'm okay. The crowds won't harm me. I can breathe through it and the day will go on. It can and it will, because it has to. As the sweat accumulates beneath my hat, I think of Mom telling me "now or never," and open the door. The bell attached to the door rings as I breeze through.

"You're so late," Mr. Thompson says after I wind through the line of customers bunched near the counter. "I thought we said ten."

A quick glance at the time — ten seventeen — and my chin sinks into my chest. "Apologies. We did agree on that time." Dad used to say, "The only good excuse is none at all," so I swallow the ones rising into my throat and try to ignore the gnawing feel-

ing in my gut that makes me want to lock myself inside the bathroom to escape all the noise and people and smells and sounds. My sensory dashboard is on overload. I imagine a little robot in a white coat frantically working to calm each circuit board before it fries. Poor fellow. His work is thankless and sometimes a complete and utter failure. I do my best to help by inhaling another deep breath, exhaling through my mouth as Mr. Thompson guides me to the space behind the counter where I'm to stand. I fumble in the small space, as another employee, a girl in a long flowy dress covered by an apron, welcomes me with a wide grin.

"Hey, newb," she says. "I'm Violet."

"Nice to meet you. I'm Dew." I keep a generous distance to not make her uncomfortable, but she moves in close enough to notice how well I've brushed my teeth (well enough, I hope).

"You have a really great aura. It's blue-centric with electric swirls of pink. Very neon, man."

I respect her need for close proximity and we stand almost nose to nose. "Interesting. What does that mean?"

Her eyes widen as if she's swallowing every centimeter of mine. "You're highly sensitive, intuitive, and have strong morals. Like, you're honest to a fault and can't seem to deviate from it, even if it'd serve you better to keep your mouth shut. I know, because I'm a *total* Purple. I can read your palms if you want."

I slip them into my pockets. "Perhaps later, after I've grown accustomed to the process and routines here."

She smiles and allows me the space to breathe again as Mr. Thompson waves me to a short stack of papers I'm to fill out. "When you're finished with these, I'll have Violet show you how to brew espresso shots for lattes."

I nod. "Sir —"

He stops me with a snicker. "Please — my dad is *sir* because he's a dinosaur. I'm Big Foot."

My eyes confusedly scan the perimeter of this man who is neither big nor seems to have larger than average feet. Perhaps that's the irony. I decide I like it. "Mr. Foot," I begin; he stops me again to remind me it's *Big Foot*, "I don't have a driver's license

yet, only a permit. My birthday is in a few weeks, though I'm not interested in driving a motor vehicle at this time. I also have some allergies that may restrict my duties outside of handling the register. I forgot to mention it when I applied."

He lays a hand on my shoulder. "I read the notes on the application. I have a little bro with some pretty gnarly allergies. We specialize in nut-free, dairy-free shit. It's my duty to represent the underrepresented, you know?"

I nod, relieved.

"If you're not comfortable with any part, I'll make sure the others know to step in. Wear gloves. Wash your hands. Take your meds," he pauses, looks me over, "you got meds, right?"

I nod again.

"I got you, bro. Let me know if you have a flare-up from anything, 'cause I've got EpiPens and all that jazz."

My posture relaxes a bit.

"It'll be all right. Come get me after V trains you on the espresso shots."

I nod again, folding my hands in front of me.

*Local boy freezes in the middle of summer – tonight at 10.*

"So, listen," Violet says, drawing me closer. "My best friend, Birdie, went through major crappage this past year, and I've learned how to be a better friend because of it. Apparently she didn't feel like she could trust me with her most important secrets, so I totally reevaluated my life choices and decided, with a cleanse, to start anew."

"Good for you." I stop to wonder why she's telling me, a perfect stranger, this.

"Point is, I know we just met, but as this new, improved me, I'm good at reading people. And it looks like you could use a little encouragement."

She pulls a notebook from the cubby beneath the register, the words on the front flap, *Book of Silver Linings*, catching the gleam

of the fluorescent lights. I watch her fingers flip and fumble to a specific page. "Confidence grows when we step out of our comfort zone and do something different." Her mouth hangs open, half smiling, as if she's waiting for my reaction.

"That helps. Thank you."

"No problem. I think you'll be okay, Dew – what's your last name?"

"Brickman now, was Diaz."

"I think you'll be okay Dew-Was-Diaz-Brickman." With a wink, she packs the notebook away. "So you're gonna be a sophomore or . . . ?"

"Correct, you?"

"Only here for the summer, then off to pre-college; a year of exploratory learning."

"Where are you headed?"

"Caramel School of Massage and Healing Arts, about forty minutes from here so I can go home when I want. Do you know what you're doing after high school?"

The question strikes me as abrupt. I've thought about the future, but not in the context of who I'll be in it. "Undecided."

"I was, too. Don't stress too much. It's only the rest of your life." She laughs, but it's glaringly obvious it's not a joke.

I turn to the stack of papers, still unsure of which boxes to check, which address to write, what emergency contacts to state. My initial reaction is my old Indianapolis address, Plum Street, and my parents' cell numbers, which I've memorized. I have to stop myself and carefully think what is true today – a Pearl Street address in Ivy Springs, and numbers that belong to Stella and Thomas. It's a habit I wish I didn't have to break.

As I neatly write my answers, I look up to see a man reminiscent of my father, dressed in desert-camouflaged pants and a tan fitted T-shirt. He orders a large coffee, black, no sugar. I have a penchant for details. They're the difference between knowing someone in 2-D or 4-D. Violet pumps the fresh java from a cafe while the man slides inside a booth near the entrance. The large window lets the sun seep in, coating him in a sunshine

glaze; almost angelic. Perhaps it's my dad inside my bones, moving my feet — he never passed a service member without thanking them for their service — but I find myself standing at the foot of this man's table.

"Thank you for your service," I say dutifully.

"Thank you," he says with a warm smile. "I appreciate that."

"Well, I appreciate you appreciating me, so I suppose we're at an impasse of gratitude." I grin, my hands tucked behind my back to fidget with reckless abandon.

He chuckles as his phone rings. "I'm sorry, but I have to take this."

"Have a great rest of your day," I say. "And thank you again."

"No, thank you —" He stops himself with a palm over the phone speaker. "We could go on forever."

Violet brings a steaming cup to the table. "This cup signifies my gratitude. Plus, you have a really great aura."

"Thank you," he tells her before his attention returns to his call.

The crowd has thinned out and I slink back behind the counter without incident. Violet joins me moments later. I study the way the man holds himself, strong and steady. I wonder who he's leaving, or coming home to. I wonder where he's been and where he calls home. I don't mean to eavesdrop. But his dutiful brawn, his voice, his presence, they almost resound in our small space.

"Sir," he says, shuffling in his seat. "I hadn't intended to — *yes*, sir. I understand."

A sudden, hard silence falls like a gavel, cutting his booth into before-and-after: the pleasantries before the call, and his tightened jaw after. He holds the phone steady in the air, parallel to his ear, before clutching it inside his fist. All the color fades from his face. I want to look away, I *should* look away. But one moment he's a floating warrior, levitating through fields of all he protects; the next he's human, weighted by a sharp blow of someone's brandished words, and I can't.



"I know that look," Violet whispers. "Heartbreak."

She says it like she knows the term well. I refrain from spilling how deeply I understand its etymology, my focus still attached to this man — a mere stranger I feel strangely connected to — if only because my story has had a few chapters that didn't end so well.

He dials a new number. His face contorts into different expressions, shaking the tightness loose to find some kind of smile.

"Smiling tricks the mind and body into thinking you aren't in pain," Stella taught me. As he forces his lips to upturn, mine do the same.

He clears his throat. "I just wanted to say . . . I . . . I love you. I wish I could stop time, you know? Of course you know. It's always about the time, isn't it, baby? We need to talk later. . . . Let me know when you and JJ are back from the farmer's market. I love you. . . . So much. . . . Talk soon."

Violet sighs. "Man. I feel for him. And whoever that message is for."

I quietly decide I'll do my best to unearth his buried treasures in the event there is an answer among them — one I've been searching for since everything in my own life changed.

"We all have things buried so deep, it would take a dedicated search team to pull them to the surface," my counselor told me once. She said it after my parents died, when I first learned of the Brickmans' interest in fostering me. It was a time when I only felt the pieces of me that went missing. This man is missing something, too.

As the clock moves forward, I feel that pull of time passing. Like oars dropped in the ocean, I scramble to grab ahold. But, losing time doesn't change what's happened.

*In tonight's top headlines, new Ivy Springs resident and soon-to-be high school sophomore Andrew Brickman finds something he hadn't intended during his first shift at Baked & Caffeinated: the crushing realization his parents aren't coming back.*