

I'd been having nightmares ever since Charlie went missing. I woke up most nights in a cold sweat terrified that whatever force swallowed him would swallow me next. And those were the nights I had the pleasure of sleeping, most nights I'd lay awake staring at my ceiling, letting the noise in my vision dance in the darkness. I didn't even pick up my phone, I didn't bother, it never helped. I had no clue where he'd gone but my imagination ran wild with ideas.

Perhaps he was taken on his bike ride back home from school, or maybe he missed the bus and got a ride from some ill-meaning stranger, or perhaps the reason was much less practical. Maybe the earth swallowed him, with no reason, no meaning. Just gone. That's how it felt. It didn't help that Charlie lived on the outskirts of town, in an old family cabin only accessible via dirt road. So even if he had taken the bus that day, the bus stop was nearly a mile from his home. I constantly racked my brain for any details of the last day I saw him, but as much as I tried I couldn't seem to remember. The day is all muddy, clouded with guilt and grief. *It's not my fault*, I had to keep repeating. But still, why was it Charlie? The ever-perfect ray of sunshine, Charlie, and not me? Suppose fate just works in silly ways.

I can still remember when I found out. My mama had been on the phone all morning, leaving me to fend for myself for breakfast. I hopped on the bus for school, scanning the rows of seats for Charlie's light blonde hair. But no luck, *he must've biked today*, I'd thought. When he wasn't in homeroom I shot him a text;

Me: *Ditching me today huh?*

No response.

I was in Physics when the Principal's voice sputtered in over the intercom;

“Dominic Castillo please report to the principal's office immediately.”

The whole class turned their attention to me, I awkwardly cleared my throat and packed my things. Maybe I'd been tardy one too many times that semester, but the year had only just begun. I thought I'd make it at least three months without detention. But, to my surprise in the principal's office stood the guidance counselor and two police officers.

"What's going on?" I asked. One of the police officers held up a backpack. Charlie's backpack. My breath caught in my throat.

"Do you know anything about the whereabouts of Charlie Galanis?"

The rest of the conversation went fuzzy in my mind. My whole world collapsed that day. My best friend in the whole world, since we were six, was gone. Just vanished into thin air. I blinked the memories away, letting the dim light of the morning from behind my blackout curtains bring my room back into focus. I turned over on my side, clenching my teeth. I couldn't cry again, there were no more tears left. Then the door to my bedroom clicked open. I shot up. My mom opened the curtains, the morning light filling the room.

"Mama..." I groaned, laying back in bed.

"*Mijo* it's time you got out of bed," She began. "You can't hide in here forever you know."

"Why not?" I pulled the covers over my head, blocking out the light.

"Dominic," Mama sat on the edge of my bed. "I know things have been hard...with Charlie, but you've got to go back to school sometime. It's been two weeks now."

"I can't..."

"Your junior year is the most important one, if you want to get into a good college-"

"College?!" I shot back to sitting up.

"Yes, your future,"

“Future,” I laughed, laying back again. “I don’t want any future.”

Mama hit me with the back of her hand, “Don’t say such things Dominic. I know it’s been hard, I’ve seen that. Life moves on *mijo*, you can’t stay holed up in your room forever.”

“I can’t!” The yell slipped from my throat. My mama’s eyes went wide and I instantly regretted it. If there was ever a time I’d wanted to disappear it was then. “I’m sorry…” I muttered, burying my face in my hands.

“When I lost my Papa, I felt like the world stopped,” Mama rubbed my back. “Like I could never breathe again. But the world still spun, and I had to keep up.”

“But how?”

“Survival,” She replied simply, “I had to keep moving so I didn’t drown in it. Fresh air and sunlight might do you a lot of good.”

I swallowed my fears, pushing my worry and concern deep down in my chest. But it kept boiling up to the surface. How was I going to sit on the bus, focus on Pre-Calc and Physics knowing Charlie could be out there somewhere in grave danger? Or worse, dead. Thoughts raced back and forth in my mind, bouncing around in my skull like gnats.

“The bus- class-” I sputtered, not finding the right words.

“I’ll drive you,” Mama suggested. “How about this? You just try, and if it’s too much I’m only a text away. Papa said he had the day off today.”

“But-”

“Try, for me?”

“Ok…” I finally relented. Mama smiled.

“I’ll make you breakfast.” She said, closing the door on her way out. I pried myself from bed, back sore and stiff from laying down so much. I sat on the edge of my bed taking in the

disastrous state of my room. Cups and bowls piled on my nightstand, dirty and clean laundry covered the floors, and old schoolwork piled up on my desk. I needed to clean, but what was the point? I took a deep breath, trying to draw in strength, I had to try even just one day. I pushed myself to my feet, throwing on a hoodie and a pair of jeans. Hoping to look inconspicuous enough that no one would try to talk to me at school. The last thing I wanted was a million people asking how I was. I wasn't sure that I could lie that much.

I dug my backpack from underneath a pile of clothes, it was completely untouched from that day. I fiddled with one of my keychains, a pendant of a moon. Charlie had given it to me that summer. He'd always compared us to the sun and moon, opposites but inseparable. I slung my backpack on my back, trying not to think too much about it. I'd just have to pretend, pretend everything was normal, that I was fine, that it was going to be okay. That was the only way I'd make it through the day. I slipped an earbud in my ear, heading down the hall and into the dining room.

The smell of fresh eggs filled the air and I could hear sausages sizzling on the stove. The food, that on any other day would be delicious, made my stomach turn. My Papa sat at the head of the table, typing away on his computer and occasionally stopping to take sips of his coffee. I sat at my usual spot to the right of him.

"Morning Dominic," He said, not looking up from his screen. I gave a halfhearted smile that I'm sure he didn't notice. Mama placed a plate of eggs, sausage, and toast in front of me.

"Eat up," She said, taking her place across from Papa.

For a moment, I allowed myself to enjoy the moment. A breeze came from the window next to the table and soft morning light filtered in from the blinds. Outside I could hear the chirping of birds, and the scent of Mama's flowers wafted in. It was almost normal. I was just

sitting having breakfast with my family. For a brief moment, I closed my eyes breathing in a deep breath. Maybe things would be okay.

“They’re holding another search party,” Papa noted, and the illusion of *okay* crumbled around me.

“George—” Mama scolded, “We were having a nice moment.” I sunk in on myself.

“I thought Dom would want to know,” He shrugged, closing his laptop.

“Why?” I furrowed my brow.

“He was your best friend, I thought you’d at least want to help look.” Papa took another sip of his coffee.

“I—” I hesitated. What a horrible friend I was...if roles were reversed Charlie would’ve spent every waking moment searching for me. All I could do was rot in bed and wish the world had swallowed me and not him.

“Police have said there’s a very small chance something got to him out there in the woods you know,” Papa continued, despite my Mama’s disapproving glare. “They said if that were the case they would’ve found him by now. His body I mean. Though I suppose there are a lot of chasms out in that part of the woods—”

“George!” Mama yelled, standing up. “Don’t torture the poor boy with the details. I’m sure he’s been through enough.”

I dug my nails into my palms trying to imagine being anywhere but at the table. Anywhere but in the reality I was in, just anywhere else. I stood up with such force my chair nearly toppled over.

“Bus- school- Gotta go-” I stammered, the bus wouldn’t be there for another twenty minutes but I had to get out of there.