

From Heroes To Humans

Andrea Azcurra

ONE

I could have sworn she was dead. So much so, I bumped into my best friend Cath as we headed down the old stairs into the foyer where Tom's friend Greg's grandmother lay motionless, except for her slow, seemingly calculated breaths, on a hospital bed facing the front door. It was one of those things where you can't help but stare because your brain is trying desperately to sort out what's real and what isn't, like when you drive by a car accident on the highway and everything seems really out of place. My face hit Cath's shoulder as I continued in my daze, eyes fixed on the decrepit old woman's torn gown and papyrus-like skin. Feeling the weight of my distraction and following my gaze, Cath turned to me with what I imagined to be equally as wide eyes as my own.

"What the fuuuuuuuck?" she slurred, acknowledging my concern but smiling emptily, looking through me and then turning back towards the group. The five of us shuffled outside to the front porch of the old Victorian house where Tom doled out cigarettes as we sat down on the cold stone steps. Cath lit my cigarette off of hers, inhaling with quick, succinct puffs and handed it back to me, looking wistfully over at Tom. I put the cigarette to my lips and inhaled long and hard, hoping as always, that the nicotine would calm my nerves. Instead, I felt a rush so quick and cold I had to stop to make sure I was still alive. I was more awake than ever. I felt the smoke go down into my lungs where I held it captive as Tom told us how he and Greg were driving to Canada in the morning. Cath flashed a huge smile at me, "We should go, Em!" That was the most enthusiastic she'd been all night, all other emotions undoubtedly numbed by the

dangerous mix of substances we'd taken in the last four hours. "What, no. I leave for college in three days," I said as I felt my words leave my tongue and float into the August night one by one. Cath's smile faded. I took another drag and felt the icy smoke resonate in my body and my head tingle. Greg spoke suddenly, as if just entering the room, "No, dude," he squinted his eyes and let a thin smile come over his face, "we'd be back before then. No problem. And plus, you'd totally be legal there. Paarrrrty central." His words were drawn out, hanging by each deep breath as he took drags in between sentences to steady himself. "My man!" Tom exclaimed with a hard pat to Greg's back and they exchanged fist bumps. Cath joined in their excitement, "See, let's go! We're already here. I mean Tom would take care of us, right Tom?" She looked at him with the same wide eyes she'd given me minutes before, though I detected a hint of sincerity this time. Tom pointed at us and gave us an encouraging nod like a father would his son after winning a big game.

I laughed and shook my head, looking around at the strangers I'd met only twenty minutes prior, as Cath and I sat casually upstairs on Greg's twin size bed. His bedroom walls were yellow, chipped paint lined the ceiling, begging me to peel it free, and there were about ten dusty pint glasses scattered around that told us where Greg spent most of his time. The curtains looked heavy with smoke stains, perpetually pulled closed, stopping any kind of sun from reaching inside the dank little bedroom. It was the closest thing I could think of that resembled a crack house or a brothel, neither of which I'd ever been in before, but I imagined girls and drugs coming in and out just as regularly. I felt uncomfortable. I felt trapped.

We'd gone there with Tom out of boredom. His parent's basement, though fully equipped for an intoxicating Saturday night, lacked people and we wanted something more. *We always wanted something more.* So when Tom mentioned he had a friend named Greg who had a cool old house downtown we could hang out in sans parents, we didn't even hesitate to take him up on the offer. We all finished our beers and passed around a small bowl to get a little bit of a high for the trip.

As we hopped into the familiar red jeep, I sunk against the back seat and told Tom to turn on some music. Even though I didn't know where we were going, I always liked a soundtrack for the ride. He started the car up and the stereo immediately blared Bob Marley, Tom's favorite artist to listen to while cruising. I smiled and swayed my head, letting the reggae beat float me down the road as we drove. As we approached downtown Albany, I felt the wind in my hair and let my hands drift with its strength, moving them up and down as if channeling an Indian dancer. I let my mind wander, eyes closed, as I watched the city flicker on the backs of my eyelids as Tom drove us farther down New Scotland Ave.

We parked on a bend in a cul-de-sac secluded from the city lights with a jolt that took me out of my trance. The music stopped and Tom announced we'd made it so Cath and I spilled out of the car giggling and holding one another by the arm. We stumbled up to the front door in awe at the size of the house we were about to go inside. Greg answered the door as if he'd been waiting for us since Tom texted him and led us upstairs to his bedroom where we met Jess and Jeff, Greg's close friends from school. Jess was a tall girl with dark brown hair and gold earrings that poked out slightly from her gelled curls. Jeff wore a stained white t-shirt and Timberland work boots, the uniform for drug

dealers in my hometown. Cath and I sat on Greg's lumpy twin mattress as Tom made us vodka screwdriver drinks in tall plastic cups and turned on some Led Zeppelin on his iPod. I drank mine fast, parched with cottonmouth and laid back against the wall feeling the ceiling spin. I welcomed the chaos. Cath joined me, pushing her head against mine laughing. We intertwined our hands and Tom joined us on the bed, bouncing playfully to get us to sit up and join the party.

Having no choice, we pulled each other up and Jess was sitting at Greg's computer desk pulling an old TV tray towards her. Jeff tossed her a bag of white powder and she began cutting lines with her debit card. *Wait a second. I know what that is. That's cocaine. They're doing fucking cocaine.* I looked at Cath for some sort of validation that she was feeling the same unease as I but by the time I turned my head her way, she was gone, already sitting on the arm of Jess's chair giggling and making friends. I watched her take a line with unprecedented expertise, closing her left nostril with her finger then coming up, eyes closed in euphoria, her teeth gently pushing through her lips in a smile. She ran over to the mattress as Jess followed with the tray, presenting it to me.

My stomach lurched. I was never a stranger to the drug scene. In fact, the majority of the people I called my closest friends were deep into that lifestyle with marijuana or pills, but I'd never seen coke with my own eyes, let alone thought about doing it. I looked at the dirty tray that resembled an attic relic with a film of dust covering the intricate orange and yellow flower pattern. Cath nudged me and smiled, "Em, c'monnnn. It's AMAZING." I wanted to punch her in her pretty face for letting our naivety slip so blatantly. But as a small town 17-year old girl, she didn't really have much of a filter. I looked up at Jess, a girl I knew less about than the cashier at Smithy's, for guidance or

advice hoping she'd see my fear, reassuring me with a shrug that it wasn't for everyone while she whisked the tray away to Jeff to start the rotation again without me. Instead she said, "Girl, you'll love it. I can tell you need it. You're gonna pass out soon if you don't. Don't be scared. We're all here. We got you." She smiled and it was the friendliest, realest smile I'd seen all night. She sat down on the mattress next to me and robotically cut my line in half. "Here. If you don't like it after just this baby line, you won't like it ever." I looked at her and then at Cath who was lying back giggling and texting, not listening, without a care in the world. "Just hold your nose like this," she pressed the side of her nostril in with one finger just as Cath had done, "and inhale." I took a deep breath and gave Tom a motion to make me another drink.

"You'll be fine, girl. Trust me." *Fuck it. I'm young.* I ran my fingers through my hair and bent over the tray, hovering for a second but not long enough to second-guess my decision. I inhaled as Jess had instructed and the chemical powder hit my skin with an acidity that sent electricity through my entire body. I sat up, finger still on my nostril and gave one last sniff like I'd seen in the movies and as I did I felt my entire skull rise with a comforting heat. First hot, then a surge of energy like fireworks in my brain, neurons popping, fizzing, New Years confetti. I closed my eyes to take it all in and the smile that Cath had shone now found itself a home on my own mouth. Jess pointed to the excess coke on the tray, "Take the leftovers and rub it on your gums. We don't waste good shit around here. Oh, and welcome to the club." She winked and my gums numbed instantly as I rubbed my powdery finger across them. A cool burst of spearminty tingles took over my face.

Tom handed me my screwdriver and I took a long, nourishing sip. Everything felt so fast like blips in a silent movie. I excused myself and felt my way through the dark hallway to the bathroom. I flipped the light switch and followed the porcelain floor tiles up to the sink, cracked and dirty like everything else. In the mirror I saw a shell of a girl, eyes tired and baggy but somehow still shining through. I half smiled and my lips cracked but I couldn't feel it. I opened my eyes wide like a crazy person, telling myself I would be fine. *People do this all the time. Just breathe. One day you'll write about this. You don't even have to get up tomorrow.* I took out my flip phone and snapped a picture.

Back in Greg's room, Cath had moved into Tom's lap and was laughing with her head back, one hand around his neck. "Cigarette?" Jess asked the room, licking her finger and dabbing the remnants of Greg's line. I finished my drink and put it next to another used glass on Greg's floor as we headed downstairs. The old chandelier that hung above the stairwell had cobwebs laced between its arms, orange-yellow light shone from only one bulb, giving the hallway an eerie crime scene feel. I followed the group as Cath took my hand, our shadows dancing across the plaster as we headed outside for a smoke.

The rest of that night I can only remember in chunks—running down the street to the corner store to get a liter of Mountain Dew, piling into Tom's jeep and driving fast up the hill back to his parent's house, sneaking inside, giggling the entire way down to the basement, playing beer pong against Cath and then finally resting my head on her shoulder as we both sunk into the old couch, groggily watching classic rock music videos on TV.

It wasn't until about 4:30 in the morning that we trudged upstairs to try to get some sleep. Cath and Tom went into his room on the right; I took the smaller guest room

on the left next to the bathroom and across from his parent's room. I laid down on the small bed looking out the window through the tiny blinds. I was no stranger to a hard night of drinking, so when the familiar spinning came as I laid my head down and shut my eyes, I thought nothing of it. But then I felt my heart. It was beating faster than I ever noticed, as if it was trying to break free of my rib cage and run far, far away from the torment I'd caused it. I started breathing slowly, big inhales and exhales to relax my body but it didn't do much. I lay there in that foreign bed with stiff sheets, heart pounding, cold sweat forming near my hairline. I shivered but my face was hot as I tried to push myself up and open the window for some fresh air. As I got off the bed, my feet searching for any piece of carpet to land safely, everything went black.

I awoke what felt like days, but actually had only been a few minutes later, on the floor of the guestroom, my head heavy and thick with a throbbing I knew was only caused from fainting. I'd had fainting spells since I was little, the first occurring when I was about four years old when a fight with my brother resulted in me punching a glass window on our kitchen doorway. The last thing I remember were the shards of glass in my palm and the blood seeping through my skin. I woke up on the kitchen floor alone.

I managed to pull myself to a seated position and as I did, felt a piercing pain down the middle of my back. I turned to look and as my eyes adjusted to the darkness, saw a huge scrape mimicking my spine, red and irritated but clearly fresh. Confused, I slowly stood up, feeling around the room for the light switch. *What the fuck just happened? Did I have a seizure? A panic attack? I hit something on the way down. I need help.* I flipped the switch and shielded my eyes from the brightness. I crept to the

bathroom to get a drink of water but as soon as I swallowed, felt the need to vomit. I filled Tom's toilet, coughing and choking as quietly as I could so as not to wake his parents who were unknowingly slumbering in the room next door. My body felt empty, my head was on fire, my hands began to shake from lack of nutrients. I dabbed a bit of toothpaste on my finger to rub on my teeth to disguise the scent of throw up and wiped my mouth as I snuck towards Tom's closed bedroom door. I knocked but no one answered. I knocked again and heard stirring. "Em? Come in!" Cath hissed, trying to keep quiet. As I opened the door, her hand was outstretched; head to one side with an airy smile crossing her olive face and Tom lay next to her on his stomach, fast asleep. *It must run in the family.*

I fell onto the bed curling instinctively into a ball, wrapping the covers around my shoulders—my brain the most scared it'd been in my entire life, my body exhausted beyond what I knew the word to mean. Cath cuddled up beside me and began to play with my hair, which helped my heart calm to a somewhat normal beat and my hands stop shaking. I drifted in and out of thoughts of Greg's grandmother laying silent and deaf in that weird hospital bed while a bunch of strangers came into her house and did drugs off her TV tray. Greg would wake her in the morning, feed her water and medication, then kiss her gently on the forehead, lingering just long enough to whisper, "I love you, Gran" before packing a bag and leaving for Canada. I woke only a few hours later as day broke through the clean, white linen curtains.

TWO

The thing about turning eighteen is you also turn invincible. At least, that's what everyone tells you. It's this weird age where you're not old enough to order a beer but you have a say in who becomes the next president and can openly smoke cigarettes without your parents getting too pissed. You start out as this infinitely dependent little thing, a blob of organs and skin and if you're lucky, hair—an infant who relies on almost every single move your caretakers make to stay alive. Eventually, you come into your own. You use your legs to walk, your mouth to form sentences, your hands to get the things you want. Then after all of that, out of nowhere, you realize you really don't need anyone anymore.

On my eighteenth birthday I went to school like any other day, my mother waking me up ten minutes before I needed to be in homeroom, relentless in making me go to class. Not because I was a bad student—I made straight A's and went to the annual academic awards dinner every year until I graduated in the top ten percent of my class—but because she wanted me to get the education she never did. She grew up in the

inner city and dropped out of high school in 9th grade to get a job to help her own mother pay bills and buy groceries. Looking back on it, I was silly to take her urging for granted, especially something so important as learning, but then again I was always so exhausted and the thought of sitting in a building for half the day on three hours of sleep made me resent a lot of things.

I opened one eye and peeked from beneath the pillow I had angrily shoved against my ears. *Fuck. Just ten more minutes. Please.* “Emma, you’re going to be late,” I could hear my mom yelling monotonously, far past bored of my antics, from the kitchen which was just around the corner from my bedroom. I reluctantly got out of bed and threw a blanket over my shoulders. It was mid November and our old house had never done well in the winter. The furnace had run out of fuel in the middle of the night and as I walked shivering into the kitchen, I saw my mother sitting on the floor in front of a small space heater drinking a big mug of coffee. “Morning, honey. Happy birthday. We’ll do presents tonight.” I rolled my eyes, hugged her, took the \$5 bill that my father had placed on the counter for my lunch before he went to work, and went upstairs to get ready. I was barely brushing my teeth as I heard one of my brothers yell, “BUS!!!!” and knew I’d missed it for the 56th time that year. *Whatever.* I’d grown used to the fifteen-minute walk anyway.

The school day passed by slowly—math, physics, lunch, art, gym where I pretended to have my period in order to sit on the bleachers and gawk at the jocks instead. When the bell finally rang at 2:00, I felt awake for the first time all day. I grabbed my bag from my locker and started towards home, except I walked about ten minutes further to a convenience store just past my parent’s house to buy my eighteen-year-old essentials—cigarettes, which I’d conveniently been smoking since

fourteen, a lotto ticket, which I won nothing from, and a Swisher Sweet cigar to empty later and fill with birthday weed. I was also supposed to buy a porno magazine, get a tattoo, and go to a nightclub, but as far as teenage rites of passage go, none of it interested me as much as a fresh pack of Turkish Silvers, a keg full of shitty beer, and being surrounded by my closest friends.

I paid the cashier using my lunch money and took my goodies across the street to the main bridge in town. It sat above the Hudson River, which was full of chemicals from years of pollution being dumped down its banks. There was a long dirt road at the end of the bridge parallel to the river that everyone referred to as “The 180”—a place for stoners and drug dealers to drive far enough down to be out of sight, park and light up or deal whatever they had for cash to pay rent or buy harder drugs to do themselves. Like everyone else, I liked to go there to get away from things. As I walked the narrow sidewalk adjacent to the busy bridge, I opened my phone to a text from Cath. “We’re throwing you a fucking partay bitch. 811 tonight.” I smiled as I reached the end of the bridge, hopping over the guardrail and walking cautiously down underneath the overpass to the beginning of The 180 where I packed my prized Camel Turkish Silvers with a few hard taps. I lit one, inhaling the peace and quiet slowly. *Happy birthday, me.* I sat back against the concrete reading the familiar graffiti that ran across and up the other side of the underpass. *Dan Sucks. April and Matt were here 6/15/01, Minority High, anarchy symbol, pot leaves.* There was a thick rope tied to a support beam about twenty feet above me that kids would swing from in the summertime, jumping into the river below to beat the heat. I’d never done it because I was too afraid of heights but I bet the rush you got from freefalling three times your body length was pretty surreal. It was far from warm

now, though. The wind whipped through the underpass and I zipped my jacket tighter, sticking my cigarette between my lips so I could warm my gloveless hands. *One day I'll move somewhere warm.*

I daydreamed about the graffiti artists whom I'd never met, or at least if I had, their masterpieces never came up in conversation. I wondered if "April and Matt" were still together, still here in this little town and if they remembered the day they took the tops off the spray paint cans and spelled out their names under a bridge, probably high out of their minds. I finished my cigarette and tossed it into the water, watching it float downstream out into the broader river basin. When I said I liked to come to the 180 to get away from things, I didn't come to do drugs like everyone else. I sat and thought a lot about a lot of things, making up stories in my head to pass the time until I calmed down or felt content enough to venture home.

It was close to six o'clock when I walked into the kitchen, but no one was there. I took off my coat in the darkness and my cat brushed between my legs. I knelt down to pet her, letting her tiny, wet nose smell my cigarette hands. I stroked her face, feeling her undulating purrs come from beneath her fur like a native drum. When I was little, I thought being a cat would be the easiest life. I was still convinced.

I made my way to my room where I took my jacket off and let it warm up on the radiator under the window. I lay down on my twin mattress on the floor and stared at the water-stained ceiling. I reveled in the quiet—being the oldest of five children including two parents, a dog, and three cats meant silence was seldom in our house. The radiator kicked to life with gentle clangs as I watched cars with bright headlights drive by my bedroom window. We lived on the main street of town and even to this day, the sound of

cars driving by soothes me. After a while, I sat up and picked through a pile of CDs near the foot of my bed, choosing “Futures” by Jimmy Eat World. I closed the player and fast-forwarded to track two, “Just Tonight”, and as the familiar drumbeat started, my phone vibrated, casting a small neon blue light into the darkness.

I opened my phone and read a text message from my best guy friend Keith. “Happy birthday, hippie. Now let’s get fucked up. I’ll pick you up at 9.” Feeling the anticipation building inside me, much like the feeling of the final school bell ringing signaling freedom, I texted back “See you soon” and started to plan what to wear to my birthday party. I’d never been a girly girl, so my closet consisted of a bunch of my brother’s old flannels, one pair of jeans laden with holes, and a few t-shirts. My terrible habit of buying an entire, very expensive outfit and then returning it the next day never had a chance to die. I grabbed a Macy’s bag from the floor and slipped into the purple dress I’d purchased the day before and strung a long black necklace over my head. In the mirror, I sucked my tummy in and turned around half admiring my own physique. *Eh. Well, I’m skinnier than Cath, so.*

By the time Keith picked me up, I had made myself up to look halfway decent with no reassurance since no one was home yet. My family was notorious for all being busy bodies. My mother worked two jobs and all of my siblings did some kind of sport—soccer, cheerleading, tae kwon do—so really we were only all together when we woke up in the morning. I scribbled a short note in the notepad we used for communication on the kitchen table for when someone did come back, grabbed my coat and headed out to Keith’s car. The 1989 Honda Civic was rumbling just outside as Keith beeped the horn his customary three times in a row, hanging on to the last one until I

opened the passenger side door. “Hey Hippie,” Keith said as I sat down on the tattered cloth seat and pulled a Turkish Silver out of the pack he always had wedged in the tape deck. He flicked his zippo lighter off his jeans, lighting my cigarette. I turned around and found my three grown eighteen-year-old guy friends—Chris, Steve, and Chuck—smashed together in the back seat punching each other and yelling various obscenities. “Hey guys. What’s up?” I yelled in between cigarette drags. Keith turned up The Dead Kennedys on the old bassless stereo and sped away down the long back roads behind my house towards the city.

As we drove, Chris and Steve took turns shoving a pocket knife into the Civic’s already destroyed roof, pulling foam and pieces of cloth off as they went. “Gimme that!” I yelled and took the knife from Chris as he gave me a sly smile and tried to poke my hand with the sharp end. I laid my head back and held my cigarette in my teeth. Carving slowly to avoid injury because of Keith’s erratic driving, I wrote my name and the date into the ceiling next to the other six or so above the passenger seat. The Civic had become a part of all of us over the last six months. It was the shittiest car we’d ever seen but that’s why we loved it. Inside its cheap aluminum frame, we could be completely reckless. We put our cigarettes out on the dashboard, carved our names into the ceiling, and shot BB guns through the back windows at passersby. We didn’t care if it was dirty or had bald tires and a headlight out—it was ours to ruin more.

Merging onto the Northway, Keith lurched forward into the steering wheel as Chuck kicked the driver seat with such force that he could almost extend his leg entirely. At six foot four, Chuck was the tank of the group and could obviously do the most damage. In retaliation, Keith swung his right arm around the back of the seat and began

blindly hitting what he assumed to be Chuck's face but instead, was just air. Chuck playfully punched back making everyone laugh with our heads cocked backwards in mockery. "Think ya missed, bud," Chuck teased as Chris and Steve joined the seat-kicking game. I flicked my cigarette out the window, watching as some of the embers floated backwards with the wind onto Chris's lap unnoticed in all the chaos. I know now that some of the best times of my life were spent in that Civic, racing down the highway with punk rock music blaring, fist fighting each other til we bruised. Sure, we got pulled over more than once. We made tons of trouble. We didn't sleep much. But damn did I love the company.

We were halfway down Madison when Keith skidded to a stop at the intersection before Myrtle Avenue. Almost in unison, we all rolled the windows down and started waving and yelling at the top of our lungs to the car next to us. Chris pushed himself on top of Steve and Chuck, unzipped his pants and let his bare ass repulse whoever looked. Keith turned the stereo all the way up as the light turned green and we burnt out to the right, barreling down Myrtle in between cars and finally found a parking spot a few blocks from 811. We all ambled out onto the cold sidewalk like anchovies coming out of a can and Keith opened the trunk where I saw two thirty racks of Keystone Light. We were all underage, but at 19, Chuck was the oldest and lucky for us, looked roughly 26. His ID worked like a charm at most convenience stores until it got denied for the first time ever the past weekend at a 7-Eleven in Mechanicville, bringing Chuck's famously Irish temper to a boil, starting a fist fight between him and the store manager. But by the looks of the Civic's trunk, the boys had found another seedy store with an equally hapless

cashier to trick into selling a bunch of high-schoolers alcohol. Steve and Chris each grabbed a case and I slammed the trunk shut.

We walked down Myrtle Ave, a street in Albany a block from all the bars and notorious for college parties. The houses were usually divided into two or three apartments, but the residents of 811 shared both the upstairs and downstairs, making it the ideal location for ragers on the weekends and holiday breaks. Our mutual friend Eric, two years older than us and a seasoned college student, lived there with four other guys he went to UAAlbany with, each progressively more delusional than the last time we'd seen them. *I guess that's what college does to you.* I honestly wondered what they did when they weren't drinking, hosting parties, and entertaining what seemed like hundreds of girls each weekend. I mean, they had to clean, eat, and do laundry sometime, didn't they? But even that seemed far too sterile for 811, so I chose to roll with it and not believe they were much like real people.

When you're eighteen, everything feels like it'll last forever. Not in the sense that things will stay the same, but that nothing bad will ever come around to mess up what you have in that moment. That's the religion you believe in when you're young and still very much sheltered from real world problems—drunk on life and weekends of laughter and best friends. Then June comes and you graduate high school. People move away to start their college lives and things start to feel permanent in a different way. The feeling sits on top of you, piggy backing its way into your mind, making your shoulders hurt as you carry it day in and day out, heavier with every step and every year until you grow apart indefinitely. When you're eighteen, nothing can stop you from feeling invincible. But eventually, invincibility becomes less about living and more about staying alive.

As we got to the front door of 811, my phone vibrated with a text message from my mother that I will never forget. Flipping it open, the familiar bright blue light shining over my face like a beacon, I read the message once then twice then out loud but it came as a whisper. “Nelson died.” I sank to the ground and let my phone fall on the hard wood porch. The party noises from upstairs flooded my ears as I blinked away tears—the heartbeat of the bass, the shrill screams of unknowing girls in short skirts and high heels, the cheers of the winning beer pong team—it all funneled together into oblivion, screaming into my head until I swore I was deaf. *A little water please, I taste you all over my teeth.*

THREE

In a haze, I followed Keith upstairs around the winding staircase to the second floor of 811. My mind was racing as I took each step—my phone still flipped open in my hand. *Nelson is dead. Nelson is dead. Nelson is dead.* The noise from inside seemed to create a sturdy wall of commotion that was quickly disintegrated by someone

spilling a red solo cup full of cheap beer at our feet as we walked through the door. Keith held my hand, squeezing tightly in rhythm with the music as we navigated through the crowd to find Eric. People all around us were screaming, stammering, punch drunk and falling all over each other. I kept my head down as we pushed to Eric's bedroom right off the kitchen.

“Duuuuuudes! What's up?! Happy Birthday, Em.” Eric jumped off his bed to greet us with hugs, before passing a purple bowl to the kid next to him, totally unfamiliar to me. “Hey. Thanks.” I managed to spit out with a half smile. Eric smiled back and gestured to his twin bed where the strange boy was just letting out a huge puff of smoke. “Join the circle, birthday girl. We just started.” Keith and I finished saying our hellos to the rest of the people in the room—Lyle, Matt, and the stranger who we found out was actually named Jon—and squeezed onto the bed. With a flick of the Bic, the circle reconvened, each of us getting a solid two hits off the tiny purple pipe, more than enough for me for the first ten minutes of a house party in my honor. Just as Eric was packing another, my best friend (next to Keith), Andrew, stepped into the doorway with two solo cups full of beer.

I smiled and ran up to him giving him the biggest hug, sloshing most of the beer out of his hands. I didn't care. Andrew and I had been so close since I was fourteen and if anyone would understand my situation, it'd be him. “So glad you're here, love!” he said, flashing a full-toothed smile and bright eyes. “Me too. I need...I need a distraction.” My certainty scared me. Ever since I was young, I'd never been the type to face things head on. I hated confrontation and dealing with feelings, and the people I hung out with were quick to nurse any pain or frustration with any substance they could

get their hands on—pills, alcohol, hard drugs—and tonight was no different. I followed Andrew downstairs to the keg and had him fill my cup to the top. I chugged it all before he had a chance to fill his own. I felt my phone vibrate again and clutched the shape of it from the outside of my pocket, holding back tears. “Another.” I stuck out my cup and Andrew smirked and made a comment about how I was such a killer before giving me a refill. Down the hatch faster than the first, I wiped my mouth of foam and swallowed hard as we slinked out into the downstairs living room to dance.

The lights flashed to the beat and I could hardly hear Andrew’s voice when he asked me if I was okay. I just stared into his eyes the way I always did when I was hiding something. I smiled and nodded, twirling around raising my arms and shaking my head back and forth to Akon’s “Beautiful”. The bass thumped and made my heart feel like it’d come right out of my chest but I kept my feet moving until I felt sweat pouring down my face. I broke away from Andrew’s hands into the center of the room and twirled around and around, as the room became a blur of colors and lights and people I didn’t know. I stopped myself as the verse started up again and felt dizzy but swung my knees together to the beat. By this time, Andrew had stopped dancing and was on the wall laughing and sipping his beer. He gave me his own look that said *Come here you gorgeous little thing* so I did, sauntering my hips seductively until I pushed up against him, dancing slowly up and down. Between beats, he whispered in my ear, “You look lovely tonight.” I pulled back and mouthed “I know,” finishing it off cutely with a smirk and a wink.

Just then, I high pitched shrieking came from behind me and I knew it was Cath. “Biiiiiiiiitch. I fucking love youuuu!” she slurred as she poured herself and her drink onto

me. “Hey Cath. Love you too. Where’ve you been?” “Dude I don’t know. I’ve been playing pong with Patrick and then we did shots and I saw Eric and smoked and then did more shots and now...I’m hereeee!” She shouted every single word while trying to keep her eyes open. I gave Andrew a glance and he took Cath’s hand and helped me help her upstairs to Eric’s room. As we dumped her onto the bed, she pulled Andrew with her, kissing his neck and clutching his back. She was in love with him and he couldn’t be more out of love with her but, like most things in our group, nobody said anything to her face.

I joined Keith at the kitchen sink for what looked like plastic bottle liquor shots with lemonade mixed in. Peeking through the group at the counter and steadying myself on Keith’s shoulder, I saw that these were much more than vodka shots—these were kamikazes. What a better metaphor for our last night than suicide?

...to be continued...