

# EYES

A reflective short story on some of society's most neglected  
stigmas

By Joseph Hopkins

Marley and Jacob hadn't met each other until they accidentally collided on the dance floor of a church group camp two summers ago. Marley had been totally oblivious to the quiet boy's existence at Lake Saranac throughout the week--the busyness of being a counselor had taken away much of the childlike enjoyment she had felt in the camp in years prior. Long, intensely hot hours watching the children run rampant around the camp had taken its toll on the new counselors, especially for Marley, who had been responsible for the eight-to-ten year old group. The dance on the last night of the two week period took place after camper curfew, giving the counselors the freedom to take advantage of their final day of summer--and it couldn't have come fast enough.

But now she had run into Jacob, a boy she's only ever seen during the bustle of meals and larger camp activities. They had never exchanged a word before this meeting, yet now they were both seated upon the dance floor with Marley covered in three quarts of fruit punch.

"I'm so sorry!" Jacob exclaimed, frantically and repeatedly. Those who had taken notice of the predicament broke into a holler of laughter. Marley took a long, deep breath, trying not to think about the new stains in her beautiful white dress, before getting up and heading for the kitchen for some napkins. Jacob grabbed the empty punch bowl and followed after her.

Marley was wiping away furiously at the large red blotches on her top when Jacob approached her with a wet napkin. "Here, I think soap will get the stains out." He said, quite nervous every, before awkwardly rubbing the blouse with the nap. Marley quickly realized her white top was becoming see through due to Jacob's soapy water residue, and she quickly slapped him away, yelling, "What the hell are you doing?!"

Jacob stammered backward, flushed with embarrassment, and crashed into the mountain of dishes sitting by the sink. The mountain swayed back and forth like a great lumbering giant. Marley barely let out a gasp before dishes began falling from the top stacks. "Watch out!" She shouted as a glass plate fell straight towards Jacob's head. Luckily, he saw it just in time to catch it, just as two more slid off from the top and plummeted towards him. He managed to catch those, too, before jumping left to catch yet another. Marley watched as the quiet, introverted boy engaged in an intricate circus act, catching dishes and plates seconds before they crashed into the ground, and she became mesmerized. When the great mountain finally stopped swaying, Jacob was holding about twelve dishes in both hands. Marley, jaw-dropped, began to clap. He turned around and gave her a reassuring smile, but upon seeing her transparent white dress, tripped yet again, allowing every single plate to fall to the ground in a sharp, resonating *crash!*

It was the first time the two had ever met, and it would change both of their worlds forever.

After spending the rest of the night cleaning the remains of the dishes in the kitchen and remaining thoroughly embarrassed for respective reasons (Marley did find a way to get back to her cabin and change, thankfully), the two found out quite a lot about each other. Neither lived in New York, and though they came from different church groups, their towns were rather close by. Marley found out Jacob had never been to the camp before, and was only forced to after his family moved so he could meet more people. Observant as she was, she also took notice of a strange, jagged scar along Jacob's left temple. Upon asking him, he only laughed and told her he had gotten it in a skiing accident the year prior.

The next day, the two exchanged phone numbers and said they would meet up sometime before they began their journey into the strange, unknown expanse called High School. As Marley drove off in the back of her mother's SUV, the only thing she could think about was the flushed red, embarrassed look on Jacob's face, and how funny it was. She would soon come to love that nervous look--and the quite boy who had fatefully collided with her that night.

They both went to different high schools, though Marley knew many of the people that would be attending Jacob's. He wasn't incredibly popular, but she did catch glimpses of him in the backgrounds of photos or heard his name brought up in casual conversation, but never in an admiring or praising way. Just a name, like an extra in a movie. A few weeks went by, then a month, then two months. As Summer came to a hazy end, Marley began wondering if Jacob had lost her number. She decided to text him, fully open to the chance that he had completely forgotten about her and/or did not want to talk to her in the first place. But to her surprise, he remembered fully, and they began talking regularly. When they finally met up, Jacob told her he was worried to contact her because he thought she hated him after the whole dress incident. Marley laughed for five minutes straight.

Her first experience with Jacob had told her he was this socially-awkward, reclusive kid, though this opinion was quickly changed after their first meeting. Around Marley, he became this flamboyant, emotional, and overall caring individual. He spoke comfortably, acted like a gentleman and always, always made her laugh. He made everyone laugh, including Marley's friends, who he had met on a few occasions. Jacob was the kind of funny that didn't come from making jokes about other people or being vulgar or exploitive, it was the kind of funny that just put people at ease and made them want to listen to that person talk. She liked hearing him talk,

anyone would. Instantly, Marley wondered why he wasn't the most popular man in the world. It took her a few weeks, but she would find out that this wasn't the only personality Jacob had.

It was Halloween, and Marley's parents were going to be out of town for the weekend, so she decided to throw a party at her beachfront house. She was quite popular herself now that she was in high school, and knew many different types of people throughout the area. Her good looks and genuine, honest nature provided her a wide variety of friends, as well as many admirers. Jacob had been hesitant when she asked him if he would attend, but ended up coming anyways, since he "had nothing better to do" on Halloween.

The party was a hit--much larger than Marley had thought. The massive attendance had spread out throughout the house, drinking beers some older kids brought--some of them were even smoking in the den. Marley tried not to think about the consequences of throwing a party of this magnitude, immersing herself in the moment instead of looking at the bigger picture. But at one point, the roar of talking, laughter and music had grown so loud, she had to find a way to step out. She spotted Jacob leaning against a back wall, sipping innocently from a red solo cup and watching the party unfold with large, observant blue eyes. She approached him and nudged his side. "Whatcha drinking, bud?"

"Nothing. The cup's empty." He said with a devious smirk, "I just want it to look like I'm doing something so these people don't think I'm a huge loser."

"That's impossible, Jacob." Marley said, trying to pry him away from the wall, "C'mon, why won't you just go and mingle. This is a high school party--you're supposed to have fun."

Jacob, remaining steadfast to his wall, just looked into his empty cup and swirled around the nonexistent liquid. Marley sighed, seeing that there was no hope for him, "Fine. How about I

go get us some real drinks, and then I'll introduce you to some people. Would you move around then?"

He looked at her and gave her a soft smile, "If it'll make you happy."

She returned the smile, then headed for the downstairs garage where the cooler was. The music and noise were muffled down there--a sweet relief to Marley's ears. As she was scrummaging through her father's collection of unconventional foreign beer, searching for the few sodas she stored down there for herself and anyone else who refused to drink, someone entered through the door. Marley was surprised to see Brian, a good friend of hers since 6th grade, standing at in the doorway of the garage, then she became worried. The smell of alcohol followed him into the garage.

"Hey Brian," She said nervously, seeing how he had started stumbling towards her, pink cheeks and a wasted grin, "Whatcha doing?"

He mumbled something indecipherable and kept approaching. Marley backed away until she hit the garage door. Brian was much larger than she was, and if she tried to make a break for it, who knows what he would do? She prayed he wasn't too smashed to completely forget who she was, or worse...

"Brian, just...just back up..." He was inches away from her, close enough for her to understand his slurred language and choke over the overwhelming scent of beer. His eyes were red and beady with lust. "Marley...let's hook up."

The words caused a screeching halt to her rapid train of thought. Before she could even speak, he dipped in and began kissing her. Marley was stunned there, trembling as the hot stench of alcohol filled her mouth. After a few seconds of being paralyzed, she turned her head away.

"Brian, stop it." But he couldn't hear her. Instead, he just snapped her chin back towards him and began kissing her again, this time holding her head in place. She banged on the garage door, kicked his shins, but nothing could get him off of her. She started to cry silently, and after a few minutes he began to reach for her hips.

Then the door opened again.

Both Brian and Marley looked over to where Jacob was standing. His face was the same the night Marley had met him, flushed red and wide-eyed. He could see this was no ordinary hook up by the makeup running down Marley's bright cheeks or the contortion of Brian's drunken face, yet he was just as frozen as Marley. After an awkward stretch of silence, Brian called out of his stupor, "The fuck you want, buddy? Can't you see this room is *occupied*."

Jacob looked at Marley, then to Jacob, then took a deep breath. "How about you just screw off, mate." It was the quietest he had ever spoken in front of her, and every word sent a tremble through his body. It looked like he was shaking worse than she was.

Brian hooted with drunk laughter, "Oh, you want me to screw off, huh? So you can get this all for yourself? Nice try, *mate*, but I ain't goin anywhere, 'less you make me." He stared him down like Jacob was a deer and he was an eighteen-wheeler, "You gonna make me, pretty boy? You gonna fight me?"

Another deep breath. Another tremble. "I'm not going to fight you. But I will do this." He pushed a button on the wall and the garage door behind Marley began to raise. She stumbled backward into the night, teary eyes still locked on Jacob. He did his best attempt to smile for her, then said quietly, "I'll be out there in a second." He pressed the button again, and the garage door

closed. The last thing Marley saw was Jacob leave the doorway and approach Brian. He was still shaking.

Marley sat on the sea wall, hugging her knees to her chest and watching the waves gently brush up against the jagged rocks. The cold didn't bother her, even in the light blouse she was wearing. It was the white one Jacob had spilt punch on. She would never be able to wear it again.

Jacob sat down next to her without saying a word. He just rubbed the dark bruise on his jaw with one hand and held hers with the other.

"Did he do that to you?" She asked, her voice shaky and quiet.

"That guy? Did you see how drunk he was? He couldn't hit a brick wall." He looked at her and grinned, which in turn caused him to wince in pain.

"Then what...what happened to him?" As furious and ashamed as she was, Brian was still a good friend to hers. Whatever Jacob did to him, she just prayed he would be alright.

"Don't worry, we didn't fight." Jacob said, easing her worry slightly, "When he came at me, I just moved a little and he tripped and hit his head on the cooler. Knocked himself right out. I got this bruise when I was dragging him back upstairs. I kinda fell and hit my face..."

They both looked at each other, then broke into laughter. They laughed and laughed, until finally, Marley's laughter turned into crying. Then she was bawling, and Jacob was holding her to his chest and whispering "Everything will be okay."

She hated herself for letting something like this happen. If she had never thrown the stupid party in the first place, Brian wouldn't have gotten so drunk and stolen away her first kiss.

"I'm sorry, Jacob." She managed between sobs, "I'm dirty now. I'm sorry. I'm sorry."

"Please don't say that." Jacob said, gently rocking the weeping girl, "Nothing could ever make you dirty, Marley. You'll be okay. Everything will be okay."

"How can you say that!" She shouted, tearing herself away from his arms, "You don't understand! I wanted my first kiss to be special! That...that was a complete nightmare!"

That's when she realized he hadn't stopped shaking. Jacob looked on the brink of crying as well--his baby blue eyes seeming almost unrecognizable.

"I'm sorry, Jacob." She apologized, "It..it's not you, it's..."

"No, Marley." He took her hands in his own trembling ones. They were warm. "I don't understand how you felt, but I want you to understand how *I* felt. When I first saw you two, I just became completely frozen. I couldn't do anything to stop him--all I could do was get you away. If anyone should be apologizing, it should be me. I'm sorry for being so goddamn useless."

"You're not!" Marley exclaimed, clasping his hands even tighter, "You're not useless, Jacob. I...I need you. You make everything better. Your smile, your laugh, your personality--it all means so much to me. Please...I...I love you, Jacob."

The night air was cold, but his hands were so warm. When she finished, they stopped trembling. His eyes locked steady with hers. For a moment, a fleeting second, everything felt surreal, as if she was staring into an enigmatic painting she could not understand. Then he spoke. "I love you, too, Marley, and I'll do everything I can to keep something like that from happening to you again. I'll make sure you're happy."

She wiped the tears away from her eyes, "You promise?"

Jacob smiled gently, "I promise."

Then he leaned in to kiss her, but right before reaching her lips, stopped himself. His hands started trembling once more. "I'm sorry." He said quietly.

Marley began to weep again.

After that night, the time Marley spent with Jacob was the best of her entire life. For the next three years, he would do anything and everything in his power to keep his promise to her-- his promise to make her happy always. He took the train to see her as much as possible, and when he couldn't afford a train ticket, he would ride his bike, despite her living three towns away. He met her parents, who also fell in love with his exuberant personality and wistfulness, and learned more about him than she ever knew about anyone else, including herself.

They spent weekends and holidays together. Her parents loved his presence in their home (they managed to keep the party a secret from them the entire duration they were together) and soon she was allowed to meet his family. The bonds the two of them shared extended to their siblings and parents, and during their second Christmas together, they held a joint party at Marley's estate. Her father had gotten Jacob a bright red Jeep, Jacob's mom and dad got Marley a knitted scarf and mittens. If there was any animosity between the two families, it was nonexistent while they were together.

The Jacob Marley had seen at her Halloween party never resurfaced, and soon she forgot about the way his eyes looked that night. The way he trembled so uncontrollably. For a while, this 'other' personality had faded away.

Jacob's father was a psychiatrist that mostly dealt with cases of severe bipolar disorder, PTSD, and some areas of Alzheimer's. From what she's observed about his overall presence in the home, or rather lack-there-of, he was not around his family very often. Jacob had told her he was an expert in what he did, but he had trouble seeing the things right in front of him. His mother was an artisan who spent most of the day knitting, cooking, watching Jacob's other three siblings, or attempting to do all three simultaneously. From what Marley observed about *her* was that she was an absolute Saint.

In drastic contrast to her own lifestyle, Jacob's family lived in a quaint, small home in the suburbs. Regardless of living conditions that were in such drastic contrast to her own, Marley felt instantly comfortable when around the hard-working mother and adornment of children at her ankles. Marley also enjoyed sitting in the bay window of Jacob's room, the spot where he did most of his writing.

That was what surprised her the most--the fact that instead of partying or hanging with friends, Jacob spent most of his time writing music. He had boxes filled to the brim with musical sheets he had been composing ever since he was little, some with lyrics, some without. Most of them were quite sad, and when he played them for her on the piano, she could barely keep herself from breaking into tears. They spent long hours in that window, listening to all sorts of amazing bands and singers. While Marley listened more uplifting, joyful songs, she did enjoy Jacob's array of powerful and sad artists. And when he found out she could sing, he all but

begged her to become the voice of his music. She agreed, and after a while felt like the lyrics were not his words, but her own. A lot of them reminded her of that night she had her first kiss stolen from her, and many of the emotions portrayed in the songs fit hers perfectly. She had told Jacob he didn't understand how it felt, but it seemed he had a pretty good grasp.

It was the first piece of the puzzle. The music.

Marley never wanted to confront him about the fact he didn't socialize very well with the kids at his school. Whenever they lightly brushed the topic, he would always say something about how immature they were, or how he couldn't find the time. One time he even told her he was afraid of drinking because of what it did to people he once knew. Marley had no qualms about his social life, just being with him made her overjoyed. It was just the fact that, no matter how he acted, people were automatically attracted to him. Her friends though he was a great guy, adults saw him as exemplary, yet he didn't have connections with many people, and if he did they never lasted long. The fact that alarmed Marley the most was that he was the one severing those ties.

The second part of the puzzle. The solitude.

Three years they spent together, the best three years Marley could ever remember. Every time they were together, Marley's face hurt from smiling so much. Jacob had kept his promise the whole time, always putting her needs and wants in front of his own. He was the most selfless, caring, innocent specimen left in a world as cruel and insensitive as the one they lived in. Three years of high school flowed by like a dream that she never wanted to wake up from, yet there was always something there. Way in the back of her mind. He was perfect, yet how could anyone be so perfect? How could anyone care so little for their own life that they make someone else's

feel absolutely wonderful in every way? She didn't want to think this way, but as she grew older, the fairytale essence of their relationship changed. It took three years for her to realize everything wasn't alright, and it hadn't been alright since before she met Jacob.

It was the third and final part of the puzzle. The girl.

And then she realized he was broken.

They had just finished eating lunch downtown and were walking along the sidewalk. It was a mere four days until Christmas, and every store along the strip was packed with last-minute shoppers and strung up with all sorts of blinking, blinding lights. For the first time in years, it was snowing during Christmas week, adding the last bit of icing onto a beautiful holiday season.

"I don't know how my dad is going to top off his gift to you from last year." Marley told her boyfriend, holding on to his warm coat sleeve as if it were a child's blanket.

"Neither do I." Jacob said, "You can't really top a jeep. Unless he decided to get me a boat or something...or maybe a helicopter!"

She laughed, "I don't know about that, but it's probably going to be big. It's the least he can do to thank you for putting up with me--"

Jacob stopped abruptly in the middle of the sidewalk, causing Marley to stumble forward. "What the...what's wrong, dude? I thought we were walking to--" Instantly Marley's heart sank to the darkest depths of her being. She had no clue who was standing next to her, where Jacob had

gone or who took his place. Then she remembered--it was the terrified, wide-eyed person who caught Brian man-handling her in the garage, three years ago at a Halloween party. His arm began to shake just like back then. Marley followed his eyes to where they stared, on the other side of the street, at a girl.

She was gorgeous, blond hair, a slim, curvaceous figure, and a flock of admirers standing around her. It was obvious it was this girl that had gotten Jacob's attention and caused him to leap out of his own skin, leaving behind this lifeless husk in his wake. Besides the young admirers huddled around her, there seemed to be a very attractive male with his arm around her hip, perhaps her boyfriend. Marley had no idea what the significance of this girl, but she knew she had to get Jacob off the street--and away from her.

"C'mon, buddy." She said, tugging along the shell of her closest friend, "Just stop looking at her. Everything will be okay if you just stop looking."

Jacob hissed in a breath. He was shaking far worse than before. When Marley looked back over at the girl, she was looking at them--or, in particular, she was looking at Jacob.

And she was smiling.

Marley managed to drag him all the way to the beach. By that time, he had begun early stages of hyperventilation and Marley had absolutely no clue what to do. She sat him down, propped up against a lifeguard chair, and ran down to the water. She scooped up a hand-full and brought it back to Jacob. It pained her to do so, but for lack of a better solution, she splashed it into his face. The prickling coldness of the freezing water managed to bring him back a little, but it would be a long time before he could look her in the eye, let alone tell her what happened.

Marley just stared at the waves and watched the snow fall, brushing Jacob's shivering, wet hair and telling him "Everything will be okay."

After about an hour, he spoke. "Do you still love me, Marley?"

"Of course. Why would you even ask that?"

"Because I'm about to tell you something, and I want to make sure you won't hate me forever afterward." He looked her right in the eyes. She still couldn't tell if they were his own. "I just want you to know everything I've done was to make you happy."

The girl's name was Claudia. Currently she was just finishing up college, but back when Jacob had first met her, she was a senior and he had been in eighth grade. Up until that point in his life, she was the most beautiful human being he had ever laid eyes on.

Claudia, ever since her first year in high school, had been an urban legend around the neighborhood and surrounding towns for the sheer amount of parties she attended on a weekly basis. Her name was often tossed around in secretive conversation--in hushed whispers they would spread her legacy of drinking an entire keg by herself, or smoking enough to hotbox three stories of a house. She was the perfect example of an abandoned child neglected by deadbeat parents without a care in the world for their daughter, but in the eyes of Jacob, she was just that; perfect.

Though he had only seen her in pictures and heard her name spread through rumors, he knew fate would bring them together one day. By eighth grade, it wasn't hard to get into a

generally large neighborhood party. Despite being 14, Jacob looked old for his age and managed to smooth talk a friend of a friend into opening a side door for him to get in. It was the first "real" party he had ever been to, and the overwhelming scent of alcohol and marijuana was enough to asphyxiate him. Covering his mouth with the collar of a hoodie, he wandered the house, weaved between crowds of stumbling drunks and the town's most infamous stoners, until finally he found her out in the backyard. In the soft glow of the moonlight, Jacob couldn't even see the beer can in her hand or the joint in the other, all he could see was the insurmountable beauty before him.

She spotted him watching her from across the yard and approached him as a vicious predator approaches its petrified prey. Jacob could smell the beer on her breath before she even spoke in her slurred speech, "Who are you?"

"J-Jacob." He stammered, then the words just poured from his quivering mouth, "I just wanted to say you are the prettiest girl I've every seen."

At first she just stared at him with large, glossy green eyes. Jacob lost himself in them, and didn't return until her wasted laughter shocked him like a taser in the side.

"You're pretty cute, too, lil boy." She took his hand; the hand that had already started trembling uncontrollably. This was the first time it would do so. "Here, come with me. It's too loud out here." Jacob didn't realize at the time there was no noise at all--everyone had started watching him and shaking their heads. "*She's got another one*" A faceless voice whispered as they entered back into the house.

She led him through the kitchen towards the front hall. She led him to the stairs, then up the stairs, then towards an open door at the end of the hall. A soft glowing light seeped out onto the creaking wooden floor, and along with Natalia's head in his own, Jacob felt incredibly,

astonishingly warm. As he was led toward the lighted door, he heard the first moan, emitting from somewhere behind one of the many closed doors. Then he heard the others, an echoing, ghostly sound that suddenly cut off the warmth from Jacob, and in that moment he truly realized what was happening.

He let go of the girl's hand, "I...I don't want to do this."

Her red cheeks and drunken smile quickly turned sour. "Excuse me?" She hissed, grabbing his hand again. This time her grip was much tighter, and much less warm.

"I said no." He struggled to pull away, to loosen her grip so he could race downstairs and escape the smoky, putrid smelling house. But she wouldn't let go. Jacob contemplated shouting for help, but in the next second, his mind became jumbled once more. Claudia's beer bottle would leave a jagged scar and a terrible reminder on the side of Jacob's head forever.

Everything happened too fast, so fast that by the time Jacob's mind returned to him, Claudia was finished tying his hands above his head. She picked up a shirt--it might have been her shirt, Jacob couldn't remember--and wrapped it around his eyes, cutting them off from the warm glow of the light and the face of the girl on top of him. Before he faded, all he remembered was her telling him over and over again that she would be gentle, and that he had started crying.

The next day he saw Claudia downtown, standing on the street corner in the arms of an older boy. Once again she saw him watching from afar, only this time she just smiled and kissed the man holding her. This was the first time Jacob realized he had something wrong with him, that he could no longer control himself, that there was something *inside* him. He went into the nearest store, went straight to the bathroom, and tried drowning himself in the sink. Luckily, a

man exited the stall just in time to pull Jacob out of the sink. Jacob ran away before the man could call the authorities.

He knew he needed to tell someone, anyone! He tried talking his friends, even people he barely knew, but nobody believed what happened, that a *girl* could do that to a *boy*. That was always the end result--he was lying, and if he wasn't, well, then lucky him. He didn't find it lucky in any way.

He couldn't go to his parents, he wouldn't be able to look them in the eye ever again if they knew what she did to him, but everyone he sought out turned him away. Suicide seemed to become an ever-present option, but he knew it wouldn't free him from the pain, the neglect, the disbelief. Above all, the thing that ate away at him the most was that every time he saw her with a different boy, it reminded him of that night. The night something was stolen from him, something he could never retrieve. He lost the most vital aspect of a human being. Jacob lost his ability to love anyone ever again.

And nobody would listen.

It could happen to a girl. It couldn't happen to a boy.

That was how things worked.

Now, on the beach in the freezing snow, hugging his knees to his chest, Jacob told the only person who would believe him, the only person he was able to love. Marley had taken away the haunting, looming darkness that had followed him ever since the day his innocence was stolen from him. He felt its presence around the friends that ignored him, he felt it at parties that contained faceless voices that never ceased to say "She's got another one", and he felt it the night Brian kissed Marley in front of him. She made him forget, but now that Jacob had seen Natalia's

cruel, unforgiving grin and the memories returned, he knew it would be impossible to love her again.

Marley could feel this too.

His eyes were no longer the eyes she fell in love with.

A week later, Jacob sleepily walked down the stairs of his home and was surprised to find Marley seated with his parents at the kitchen table. At first he was confused to see them all there, especially Marley, since it was near 2:00 in the morning. None of them said a word to him--they all just stared with sympathetic eyes, the eyes a passing stranger may give a lost pup, or a bereaved friend after they lose a family member. Since neither of those could possibly be the case, Jacob's mind immediately raced to the worst case scenario, the scenario that had haunted his dreams for the past four years. And if it hadn't been apparent what was happening by that point, it definitely was when the words "I'm sorry" began forming at Marley's lips.

"You told them?!" He exclaimed, shrieking loud enough to wake the next six blocks.

His father and mother stood from the table. Marley approached him, trying to speak calmly, "Listen, I know you didn't want me to, but your dad can help. We think you might have serious PTSD, and I know this sounds bad, but you've got to get it out. You can't keep living like this..."

Jacob stumbled backward, mind reeling. The faces in front of him became blurred and unrecognizable. "You told them...I can't believe...you actually told them..."

Before Marley could grab ahold of him, Jacob spun around and dashed out the front door.

The screen swung around and crashed shut with a deafening *clang*.

Marley was ready to go after him when his father shouted from the kitchen, "Wait! You have to let him be. I've worked with this sort of condition before, and the best thing to do is let them work it out themselves--"

Marley turned around with all the rage in her small body rising to her head, "Are you fucking kidding me?! Let him be?! What the hell is wrong with you?! You've let him be for four years and that's why we're in this goddamn situation! How could you not have noticed something this serious was happening to your son? I don't care how good of a doctor you are or how well you do your work, if you can't even help your own family then you are a failure of a father!"

With that, she raced out the door after Jacob. Another defining *clang* followed.

It was the coldest morning of that winter. The air had dipped well below freezing and every bit of oxygen felt like a sharpened blade stabbing at Marley's throat. She ran up and down the streets, calling for Jacob and receiving only the *swoosh* of branches swaying in the wind as acknowledgement. All she could think about was the time he tried to drown himself in the restroom--that had been in the heat of the moment as well. Who knew what he was capable of doing to himself this time?

As Marley searched, she also began to hate. She hated his parents for not realizing their son's enormous pain beforehand. She hated Jacob for not finding the proper help. She especially hated Claudia for doing such a heinous thing to him. But above all, she hated herself. She had told Jacob he didn't understand when Brian stole her first kiss from her, when in fact he understood far more than she knew. The incident with Brian was in no way shape or form

comparable to what happened to Jacob, not at all! She had always wanted to approach him, ask him to truly tell her what was wrong, but she never did. In the end, she realized she never even took the time to ask how he was feeling.

Finally--finally--she found him, sitting alone along the sea wall, watching the waves crash gently into the jagged rocks and the snowflakes fade into the colorless waves. She approached him, sat down, and took his hand. When he looked at her, his eyes had lost their childish gloss. They lost all happiness and hope and wit and laughter she saw while they were together. He was the lost pup, the boy mourning over the loss of life--his life--which had departed him all too quickly. There was nothing to say beside him, he was the one who was good with words--he always had been. Anything she could have said got caught in her throat every time they met eye to eye. So she sat there, holding the trembling hand of her best friend, watching the waves, the same way they did the night Marley realized she loved him. Now she realized she lost him.

She had no clue how much time had gone by when finally he spoke, "You wanna know something? I lost my virginity before I even had my first kiss. People think that's awesome, they even tried to congratulate me. But ya know what? It sucks. It really fucking sucks. I just want to be clean again, Marley. I just want to be clean..."

Marley led his head into her chest and stroked his hair gently, saying over and over "Everything will be okay. Everything will be alright."

But she wasn't talking to Jacob anymore.

She didn't know who she was talking to.

The next night.

Marley bursted through the screen door, a mixture of sweat, rain and tears covering her terrified face, "Where is he?! Where the hell is he?!"

Jacob's father raced over to her and put a blanket over her quivering shoulders. The heavy snow had turned into a terrible storm. Everything, from trees to houses to animals, seemed to shake and screech in pain. Jacob's mother, adorning a face even more contorted in fear than Marley's, approached her slowly. In her hands, the note he left behind.

Marley tore it out of her hands, though she had to viciously wipe the tears from her eyes in order to read it. In scribbling, large letters spanning the entire sheet of paper were the words, "*I'm going to fix myself.*"

Instantly, Marley knew what this meant.

"I know where he's going." She panted, throwing the blanket from her shoulder and spinning towards the door. A firm hand grabbed her arm, "Wait!" It was Jacob's father.

In between panting: "I know...I know I may look like the worst father in the world in your eyes, and lately I've been thinking the same. I've put my work in front of my own family, and it blinded me from the real issue in my life. Everything I've done...Everything I still do is solely to make my family happy, and I thought working hard and giving up all my time would make that possible. But I was wrong. The problems I dealt with everyday were resting right under my nose, and I never even took the time to ask 'hey, buddy, got anything on your mind?' I'm a goddamn psychiatrist, for pete's sake, and I never even asked my son if he needed help. I know I'm a

failure of a dad--and a failure of Doctor, and maybe even a man--but I want to help Jacob. I want to do *something*. So *please*, tell me where I can find him. Tell me where I can find my son!"

The door was unfamiliar to Jacob. He had been here once before, but that day had felt so distant. So...unbelievable. He approached the door, grasping the metal object in his coat pocket. He had followed the directions to this very house--not just the directions, but everything he followed had led up to this point. This was the culmination of all the pain and suffering in his life. Behind the door rested the epitome of his inner demon, which was not so 'inner' anymore.

There would be no warm light behind the door this time.

Jacob's father slammed on the car horn, knowing it would be just a fruitless vent of his frustration. The highway had been jammed in massive traffic for the next ten miles. Everyone was trying to escape the blunt of the storm, but the farther they went, the darker and harsher it grew. Now Jacob's parents and Marley sat idle in the dead-stop highway, unable to do anything but scream, cry and honk the car's horn.

"We've still got another half-mile!" Jacob's dad exclaimed as he slammed on the dashboard. Marley looked out the window into the typhoon that now ravaged the Earth. The trees

were hanging on by mere limbs, and even those wouldn't hold for long. Jacob was somewhere out there, and something told her the trees weren't the only ones running out of time.

"What the hell are you doing?" Both parents yelled in unison as Marley pushed open the car door and braved the storm.

"I'm going to find him!" The wind was so heavy that it took her voice and whisked it far away. Jacob's father stared at her for a long moment. His eyes held more care and love for any one human than Marley had ever seen in her life. There was no way she could ever love Jacob more than the two people in front of her. They weren't terrible parents, they were *human*.

Then, he nodded.

And Marley began running up the highway.

On the other side of the room, Jacob found exactly what he had expected, a scene not to different from the one lodged within his own memory. Claudia pulled the blanket up to her chest and shrieked--the boy who had been sharing her bed rolled away and covered himself with a pillow. Jacob didn't recognize the face, but a name did resonate deep inside him. That name was Brian.

When he realized just who Jacob was, his surprise and embarrassment quickly turned to rage. He approached Jacob menacingly, one hand using the pillow to cover his groin, the other clenched in a tight fist.

"You just don't learn do ya?" He growled through closed teeth, "Will you ever mind your own freaking buisness?!"

He threw a punch.

Jacob pulled the switchblade.

The rain cut across Marley's face as she weaved between cars. The symphony of horns that followed her and crashing thunder overhead deafened her, overcame her like a shadowy, colorless wave. Jacob was gone, gone far before she had even met him. And yet she was still running to save him, like trying to retrieve a snowflake in the ocean.

There was a moment when he was there. And then he disappeared into the dark.

Brian lay on the little rug, motionless, like a statue. Claudia's voice was gone. She remained petrified on the bed, eyes switching rapidly between the body on the ground and the boy approaching her, bloody switchblade in hand. She was sure she remembered him, his face was the same as a boy she had met long ago. But they couldn't be the same--they just couldn't be. The boy she slept with had beautiful, innocent blue eyes. This one's eyes were black and filled with hate.

They couldn't be, but they were. She knew they were.

"I'm sorry..." She said first, in a whisper, then louder, "I'm sorry! I'm sorry! I'm sorry! Oh my God, I'm so sorry! I didn't mean for this to happen! I didn't want any of this!"

The boy kept approaching her, eyes locked into hers, switchblade inching closer and closer. Claudia was backed up against the head rest with nowhere to go, trapped in her own bed. The tears broke loose like the storm outside

"Please...don't. I...I loved you."

The cold metal touched her skin and she fainted. She never felt the pain.

Marley stood in the doorway, trembling worse than the trees and the houses and anything else the wind could shake.

To her right, Brian lay in a pool of blood, a thin red streak slit across his throat.

On the bed, by the headrest, the girl from the other day, the girl Jacob called Claudia, sat upright. It was hard to find just which cut on her body was the one that ended her life.

Then there was another boy, the boy she used to call Jacob, sitting, breathing, yet frozen, staring down at his own bloody hands. He was shaking.

On the ground by his feet was a small silver switchblade.

"I...I just wanted to be clean." He croaked. Even his voice was different from Jacob's.

He was gone. Marley didn't want to believe it, but he was gone. His mind had snapped, the ghost of his past self overtaking the appearance he had created to make her happy. The disposition she had fallen in love with was gone, and only this hollow shell remained.

"I didn't want this..." He kept trying to convince himself he was okay. Everything was okay. Someone had told him that once, but he couldn't remember.

Marley inched forward. He would be charged now, and found guilty. He would be placed in a mental asylum. He would die a thousand more times before he was allowed to be clean.

Not there. She didn't want him to go there.

She wanted his wish to be fulfilled more than anything.

So she picked up the knife.

"Lay back." She told him, attempting to sound as gentle and caring as possible.

Surprisingly, he listened. "I didn't want it to be like this." He said under his breath.

Marley spotted Claudia's shirt lying on the sheets. Carefully, she picked it up and laid it on his face--she couldn't bare looking at him any longer. Then she got over him, switchblade shaking in her quivering hands. She aimed it just above his heart.

"Hey Claudia?" He said quietly from under the shirt.

Marley froze, the worst pain she had ever felt rising in her throat. "Yes?" She asked in her best impression, but she could barely form the word. She didn't realize she had started crying so badly.

"Be gentle, alright?" He asked. Then he folded his hands on his stomach and waited to become clean.

Marley wiped the tears away with the hand, smearing someone else's blood across her face. "I will, Jacob. I will. Just know...I always love you."

"I love you, too, Claudia."

Then she drove the blade into his chest, and the snowflake disappeared into the waves.

Outside the window, it stopped raining.

## 10 YEARS LATER

Marco carried Marley into their hotel room, both laughing as heartily and drunkenly as their overjoyed hearts allowed. The wedding had been a hit, everything Marley had ever dreamed of. Marco knew exactly what she wanted, from decorations to guests, and made the perfect celebration for the most perfect woman in his life. Indefinitely, the past five years they had spent together since graduating college had been the best years of his life.

Marco pushed open the door with one burly arm while carrying his newly wedded wife in the other. He was prepared to place her on the bed when she pushed on his muscular chest with her small, delicate hands.

"I don't wanna go to bed! I wanna dance!" She jumped from his arms and began spinning happily about the large, expensive room. Marco laughed, thinking about all the times he would get to see her dance now they were together. She spun and spun until her balance was lost completely, and her new imminent partner became the floor. Marco jumped forward to catch her, colliding with an intricately decorated vase on the way down. The three of them ended up in a pile on the rug.

"Ow!" Marco half-laughed, half-wincing as he sat up from the floor, "Damn, we broke the vase. I think a piece of it cut me when I fell on it." He touched the long, red scar that had cut

through his white shirt. It went straight across his chest. "Damn, lucky it wasn't deep, or it would've got me right in the heart, haha!"

Then he realized his wife was not laughing, and instead had begun to shake horribly. Her eyes were wide and full of terror.

"Shit, babe, you alright? Did you get cut?!" He searched his wife for any blood or scrape, but she seemed virtually unharmed. In a very light whisper, he heard her say a name. A name he had never heard before.

He pulled away and looked at her quizzically, "Who is Jacob?"

But she didn't respond, all she did was shake and say over and over again, "I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm sorry."

Quickly, Marco leapt to his feet and raced for the phone. He called 911 and as the ringer went on and on, he looked back over to where his wife sat on the floor.

The operator picked up, but Marco didn't say a word.

For something was wrong. Something was terribly, terribly wrong.

He could not recognize the eyes of the woman he loved.

They had changed.

## AFTERWORD

The aim of this short story was to shed light on two very important subjects I believe are overlooked in our society, the crippling, painful reality of a mental illness known as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, and another stigma that seems to veil our society for as long as mankind has recognized the difference between right and wrong; rape and sexual assault.

Firstly, PTSD is a serious illness that affects millions of people everyday, the majority being undiagnosed. This disease could not only harm the relationships between other's and one's own mind, but could also prove to be life-threatening. This story is definitely an exaggeration of the repercussions of withholding this disorder, but there have been reports of less 'deadly' events occurring amongst patients suffering from the disorder, primarily those who go undiagnosed. The hard thing about diagnosing someone with PTSD is that it is an illness that can be triggered by an inordinate amount of things, from a car accident, a horrific scene, or even something as gruesome as depicted above. Obviously, the main characters of the story suffer from undiagnosed PTSD as a result of not going to an adult or therapist to discuss their issues. Instead, they both withhold their pain, thinking what they are doing is 'right' in an attempt to make others happy. This causes both of them to sink deeper and deeper into a pit of depression, until both generate uncommon, devastating holes in their very being (evident by extreme shaking and losing themselves when remembering the event).

Another stigma that is drastically overlooked in our society is the issue of rape; particularly young men being assaulted by woman. This occurrence is believed to be so rare that we may sometimes feel uncomfortable with the topic. Bringing up such a grotesque, unsavory situation will instantly gain you looks of uncertainty and disbelief. The reality is that this sort of

thing happens all the time, yet goes unrecognized because of this acidic stigma. It is this exact response that causes Jacob (and many other victims) to avoid seeking help from adults and others. Mixed with serious PTSD and the pain of losing his innocence to such a terrible human being causes this character to break down in a most horrific fashion.

Again, I would like to state this entire story is completely fictitious--it is an extreme exaggeration, actually--with only certain aspects of the characters mirroring my own emotions in some way. The story does, however, focus on these two very real, very haunting stigmas and events that could possibly ensue. Jacob's story may seem unreal, and his reactions may seem fabricated and fake because of this. His emotional personality may serve as a major cause for the terrible burden he felt, though overall, I can understand how Jacob would come across as unbelievable. I realize this, and that is because Jacob is not everyone. Jacob is unique, with unique experiences and a unique pain. That is the reason I avoided telling the story from his perspective, and instead made Marley the protagonist. In personal opinion, where Jacob was not relatable, Marley was. I aimed for her to be just a normal, high school girl that everyone can understand--she didn't have any grave, life-threatening secrets, for example. Not only did I want Marley's personality to be relatable, I also wanted her actions to be ordinary ones. Marley knows something is wrong, yet she never once confronts Jacob about it. She understands the importance of venting one's feelings, but she can also see where she had fallen short of providing attention to her friend's serious problem. This became a major issue in the story--an issue I molded completely from personal experience--and that is the issue of not letting things out, of acting strong when in reality you are falling apart, and the importance of being there for others.

The stigmas I explained are painfully neglected in our society and are the cause of much hardship in the lives of people, whether they be young or old. Without someone to talk to or a way to vent their frustrations, the victims can end up being consumed by their fears. That is why we have to be there for others, abandon the stigma our society follows so closely and look out for one another. Just think, a simple question like "What's wrong?" Or, "Please tell me if there is something I can help you with" can potentially save someone from losing themselves. Take the time to genuinely care and listen, not just because it's the right thing, but because if this were happening to you or someone you know, you'd want to be there for them or have someone be there for you. We all have demons in our eyes--everyone does--but we also have the power to save others. Just by providing an ear, a helping hand, or even a single word of acknowledgement, we can quell these demons before they can take over our lives. If there is one thing I can say about the above, it is this: if you are suffering, please, go to someone. A parent, a therapist, an authoritative figure--there are so many resources to turn to. I know how it feels to want to be strong for others, I know the burden, but I also know what happens when you withhold such emotions.

Don't give way, and don't give up.

We're all in this together, after all.