



SHADOWWALKER

The Rogue Recordings



BY:
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Rum and Coke

I knocked back whatever cheap excuse for whiskey the bar was serving. It was the type of dive decent folk have no business in. A case made clear by the current company. What looked like a washed-up biker-gang member was nursing a beer at the bar, a small group of the most unscrupulous types loitered near the door, and the bartender looked like a Vietnam vet, judging by the glazed look in his eyes as he polished up his glasses.

I fit right in.

My table was slightly off balance; luckily it was matched by the tilt of my chair. The table was slightly sticky to the touch and cigarette burns marred its surface. Apparently they didn't get the smoking-ban notices.

The door creaked open, accompanied by a cold draft. The group nearest to the door huddled closer together whilst glaring at the intruder.

The trespasser was short, stunning, and walked with a confidence that defied logic. Not at all the type of person one would expect to see in a place like this. Her dark hair swept around her face, blowing with the biting breeze. She was wearing high boots, a short skirt, and tight-fitting clothes. The others in the bar no doubt thought her dress provocative. She looked like she belonged on the runway at a fashion show, not in this dingy bar.

However, I saw through the façade. Partly it was the way she walked—far too smooth, almost alien. Second, the demeanor—she walked into the room like she owned it, because in her mind she did. She was the most dangerous person here. Finally it was the look. The look we all developed. You walk into a room, check the corners and exit, and size up everyone inside, all in a single look. A quick glance. A side effect to always hunting, or being hunted. The biker spared her a cursory inspection and dismissal. The interest of the group by the door was far more overt. It was clear I was the only one in the room who recognized her for what she was.

Once you understood what she was, her dress was no longer provocative, but practical. The tight, high boots were no doubt stiffened leather, steel-toed with reinforced soles. The type of boot one might expect to see in combat, but styled for a night out. The glossy exterior was just for show. I would put money there was at least one blade hidden within them too. The bare legs and high skirt allowed her the freedom to move quickly without worrying about her clothes

getting caught and tearing. Even her well-fitted jacket wouldn't restrict her range of motion, though even I couldn't justify revealing that much cleavage.

She sauntered over to the bar and ordered a drink with a voice that simply taunted a man from his very soul...or maybe the feeling came from somewhere lower. It was a low-purring, husky sound that carried to everyone in the room. She sounded like she had stepped out of a noir movie from the fifties and into our bar. But it was what she said next that sent shivers down my spine.

“And a rum and coke for my friend.” With a nod in my direction.

Just like that, the room was divided. Us and them.

She walked over to my table with both drinks in hand. She placed them down and attempted to slide one across to me. The sticky table impeded its progress. I retrieved it from the halfway point.

She took her own in both hands, sipping gingerly, looking demure. Her behavior now completely unlike when she had walked in. She clearly wanted something. I waited patiently. She had sought me out. I had no idea who she was, or why she was here; I wasn't about to speak first. But I would never turn down a free drink. I contemplated leaving once I had finished if she didn't speak up.

Sadly, the four by the door didn't give me time to decide. After a brief conference, they walked up to our table. They approached my new guest from behind. The one I took to be the ringleader leaned against the table beside her, with the rest forming a loose circle behind.

I'd describe them for you, but in the end they and their exact fates are irrelevant. He offered to pay for her drink in exchange for a good time, and the rest left little room for misunderstanding the implication. She declined, of course. Maybe if she had tried using a different voice, one with a little menace, they would have left her alone. Maybe they would have backed off if the bartender stepped in. Or maybe I should have intervened. But any other scenario would have likely only involved more people in the fight. That's how it is with some people. They just can't let others be. There is no live and let live with them. Only their world and their desires for how it should be.

I knew what was going to happen. But even knowing I couldn't stop my body from reacting the way it had been trained. Fortunately, since I was not directly involved that only meant the

shadow sight. Still, I knew the others would see my eyes glowing green from my corner booth, if they had cared to spare a glance in my direction.

I watched through a hazy darkness as the shadows began their dance. The ringleader reached a hand over to grasp her shoulder, even before it happened. She reacted as it did, firmly batting away the offending limb. It looked as if she had put barely any effort into the motion. But the resounding crack told a different story.

In my shadow sight, I watched the dark outlines of the men move toward her moments before their bodies followed. One reached to restrain her hands while the others grabbed for her body. They would have had better luck grasping a gust of wind. She moved too fast for a normal human to follow, striking her steel heel down on the foot of the one to her right as she stood. Pirouetting in place, she delivered a spinning kick to the mid-section of the next. A sharp crack filled the air. He crumpled instantly.

She was already moving back towards the one stumbling from broken toes. A flurry of blindingly quick fists to the ribs. A staccato of cracks only I could pick out, as they broke within milliseconds of each other. He finished his fall. The third received a striking elbow to the head. The fourth was the recipient of a strait kick to the midsection. He collapsed at her feet while she moved on.

The last, the leader, was just beginning to take in what had happened to the first, before taking an open palmed blow to the side of the head. His head rebounded off the table as he dropped to the floor. She had moved through them all with surgical precision. The blows calculated to take them out as efficiently as possible. A few broken bones to serve as lessons they would undoubtedly refuse to learn. They may have deserved their fates, but it was still unpleasant to witness.

Even worse, she turned toward me, which caused the remaining two witnesses to look in my direction as well.

"You coming?" she said with a smirk.

It wasn't a question. She knew exactly what she was doing.

As far as I knew, I was the only one like us who showed physical signs of what I was. The only one whose eyes glowed. Forced out of my refuge, I had no choice.

"GET OUT!" the bartender roared in our direction.

I pressed against the top of the table and forced the chair backward as I stood. It grated harshly against the worn floor. A few muffled moans from those on the floor were the only other accompanying sounds. The table itself left a sticky residue on my hands. I had no desire to learn exactly what it was and instead wiped them on my own dirty pants. The last few days had not proven kind.

I made my way around the table and stepped over the unfortunate victims of the recent altercation as the other three watched. The woman stood still, waiting somewhat impatiently for an answer. The biker toward the door watched the proceedings with a sort of grim curiosity. But it was the bartender whose actions I was most interested in.

As I approached the bar, he recoiled back in response. The phone he was presumably going to use to call the proper authorities fell from his grasp and bounced at the end of its coiled cord. I could hear a faint dial tone emanating from it.

I supposed I did strike an intimidating figure. Though not because of my body. I stood a bit over six feet tall and had an athletic build, but was not overly muscled. It was everything else. My movements were far too quick and smooth when I wasn't trying to blend in. My clothes were worn and dirty from days of use without change. And likely most obvious to him, my eyes were glowing green, a feature I could not observe for myself, but I'd been informed it was quite intimidating. Regardless, to him I was more than human. And thanks to this woman's actions, he knew it meant I was dangerous.

"One for the road?" I asked.

He reacted quickly enough, though his movements were jerky. I wasn't sure if it was fear or the small wad of cash I dropped on the counter that acted as the more productive prompt. Either way the result was a very generous pour.

I put down the double shot and followed the woman to the door. I let the burning in my throat distract me from the situation I had been so unceremoniously dragged into.

"It's Ryan, right?" Again, not a question. She knew damned well who I was.

I walked out into the cold, hazy night without answering.

"You have a place we can stay at least?" she asked exasperatedly.

For once it was a real question.

I did, but her place was probably better. I waited for her to lead the way.

"Ok, I get it. Sorry to drag you into this like that. But I need your help, and I think you could use mine," she admitted.

Finally, some honesty. Not that it helped. By her own admission she was going to try to pull me into her business. Though, based on what I'd seen of our world, it was undoubtedly not just her, but them. *They* were most likely up to something much deeper than just what *she* would let on. At least trying to figure it out would take my mind off the present; the burn from the whiskey had worn off.

"This way," I curtly responded.

I led her to the cheap motel where I was staying. Cheap motels didn't ask questions. The walk was short. As the rule goes: disreputable bar, disreputable motel not far. My room was almost as empty as the lobby. Just a lone backpack. All I had left in this world. Well, that and the clothes on my back.

I still held on that maybe the next life would hold something brighter; *someone*. Thankfully, this woman didn't immediately comment on my sad state of affairs, though her face gave her away.

She opened with, "I think I can help you get what you want most in this world."

"You have no idea what I want," I replied.

"Revenge."

Ok, maybe she did have some idea, but knowing was only half the battle.

"I don't need your help with that," I retorted.

She walked over to the sole chair, placed behind a sad, wobbly desk. She pulled the chair out and sank languidly down into it. Somehow she made even sitting in that dejected chair in this miserable room look seductive. Maybe that was her talent. I had sworn I'd never let my guard down like that again.

"I can get you directly to him," she purred.

"Again, not the issue," I responded more sullenly.

"Without hurting anyone else," she countered.

"How?" She had piqued my interest.

"First, I need to know your story," she said lazily.

"No. Hell no! Why do you need to know my story? What does any of that have to do with dealing with them?"

I scratched at the unkempt beard that was beginning to form from the lack of a razor's caress. I could not read this woman at all. I paced in the short space between the bed and the desk.

"It's simple." She leaned forward. "I help you get answers, but you have to help me too. And what I need from you right now is to know whether or not I can trust you. The easiest way for me to get an answer to that is to hear you tell your tale, from the beginning. I know some already, but current circumstances do not reveal a terribly trustworthy character. If you want my help, you'll have to prove you're worth helping."

I really didn't see how sharing my past with her would be the catalyst needed for her to help me. But hey, I was pretty desperate. It wasn't even a matter of needing the extra manpower—or womanpower, as it were. Maybe talking through it would be cathartic. Like therapy. Get it out in the open, examine all the little pieces and memories, before shutting them back in their boxes. Then I could feel at peace about it, right? Isn't that how it worked? I didn't even know anymore. I just missed *her*.

"Ok, but it isn't a happy story," I replied.

I knew I wasn't only agreeing to this for her help. Maybe she could do what she promised and arrange an impossible meeting, but even if she couldn't, at least I would get a chance to justify myself and my actions, even if only to myself. I knew more people would get hurt if I simply took matters into my own hands. Enough people had suffered because of my decisions. Would explaining everything that had happened exonerate me? Of course not. But I needed a reprieve. Anything different from the past few days of despair trapped inside my own mind. I stopped pacing and flopped back on the bed in defeat.

"Based on this sad state of affairs, I should hope not," she said with a dismissive glance around the room, "or you've got some serious problems. And we have more work to do than I thought."

Smartass.

It was the thirteenth of October; that day will forever be burned into my mind. I still don't know whether to consider the series of events that began to conspire that day a blessing or a curse. I can't honestly say I would do anything differently, given a second chance. Do not misunderstand. There are many things I wish I could change, but based on what I knew at the time, I did what I thought was best. It cost me greatly. But before I tell you all about it, you must first understand me, so you don't judge the final outcome too harshly.

Let us get the background out of the way and begin somewhere relevant. I finished high school with relative ease but failed to put in the necessary effort to propel myself forward into the real world.

Therefore, my first two years of college were to be accomplished at a local community school. It was relatively cheap, would get my generals out of the way, and catch me up with my more ambitious peers. It was neither prestigious nor highly academic, but it was necessary. Most importantly, it was fun—lots and lots of fun. Mostly due to Thomas Dominique.

He stood taller than average at six-foot three inches, with wide shoulders and the body of a Greek God. He was also a starter on almost every team our school could field but was easily division-one-athlete material. Easy going, aloof, and never let anything to get to him. He was everyone's friend.

But for whatever reason, he chose me as his best friend. Maybe he took pity on me, or maybe he used to be like me, or maybe it was just circumstance. We ended up roommates thanks to the lottery system the Community College used to organize its students. That freshman year he basically took me under his wing.

In high school I was the epitome of average. I got average grades while putting in little effort. I played several sports but was never a varsity starter. I was just a hair over average height and build. I even had average friends. We played video games on weekends and occasionally stole a drink from our parents' liquor cabinets, but never did anything too adventurous.

Tom was from a whole different world. Honestly, I never got to know too much about his past. But that didn't matter, because he lived entirely in the present, for the moment. I just figured he was the son of some rich family, and coming here was his punishment for some past grievance to his parents. A sort of purgatory before being shipped off to some coastal Ivy League

school where everything would be paid for. His demeanor and confidence suggested he was a bit more mature, older than the rest of us. You'd be hard pressed to tell by his looks though.

He introduced me to this world of his. One I had never been privy too. A world I'd only seen in movies before freshman year. I still don't know how he did it. He was like a magnet for out-of-control parties and situations. People flocked to him. Everyone wanted to be with him, since they could never possibly *be* him.

Freshman year itself was a blur. Tom took me on as basically his sidekick. At first people resented it. I was where they wanted to be. But after a while, people just got used to it; and I got to know almost everyone around campus. I never lost sight of where I was, though, under his shadow. Thing is, it was a hell of a shadow. I had plenty of room to stand and move about there. On my own, I was only ever average. But by his side? I was in the presence of a legend. That was the aura he put off, the effect he had on people—myself included.

That year I more than made up for everything I missed in high school. Drugs, alcohol, parties... You name it, I tried it. I even kissed a girl! OK, maybe I was pretty lame in high school after all. Being best friends with Tom was akin to being best friends with a celebrity. My freshman year was like an episode of *Entourage*.

Unfortunately, all the fun came to a screeching halt midway through April.

I sat on the edge of the hospital bed. The odd parchment covering crinkled beneath me as I shifted anxiously. This was already my fourth visit in as many weeks. The initial diagnoses had been from curious test results during a routine physical. The following visits had been further testing and confirming everyone's fear: cancer.

My mother stood by my side, a hand on my shoulder. My father sat in the other chair in the room and stared at his phone. He was probably looking up everything he could on the different types of leukemia, so he could feel like an expert when the doctor arrived. This was actually the first time they had made the drive out to this little podunk town to visit me.

The wooden door opened with a light creak, and in strode Dr. Jones. We had become something of compatriots in the last few weeks. He greeted me with a nod, but no smile. Both my parents quickly crossed the room and shook his hand with short introductions.

"I'm afraid I do not bring good news," Dr. Jones began.

He paused a moment to look from my mother to my father, before addressing me directly.

“I’ve delivered this type of news on very few occasions and found there is no good way to do it other than directly. It appears you have a very rare case of two different types of leukemia infection. Acute myelogenous leukemia, or AML, which is, by itself, a fairly treatable disease. However, we have also discovered T-cell-prolymphocytic leukemia, which is much more serious.”

He looked around the room at my parents and me, waiting for the news to hit us.

“What does this mean, exactly?” My father asked. “What’s the next step?”

I guess my dad hadn’t done enough research yet to truly understand the gravity of the prognosis.

“Well, if it were just one or the other I would suggest chemotherapy, alemtuzumab, maybe some other experimental treatments. T-PLL is already a hard type of leukemia to treat by itself...” He trailed off and looked down at his clipboard for a moment before looking back up and holding my gaze. “Unfortunately, due to the severity of the two diseases and as far along as they are, I don’t think there is anything we can do. My best estimate is that you have eight to ten months left.”

I sat still, stunned. What do you say when you receive the news that you’re dying, end of freshman year of college? The greatest year of your life? I felt my hands go numb as they gripped the edge of the examination table. I could feel the grip of my mother’s hand on my shoulder tighten. Dr. Jones continued on about different treatment options that could extend my life, but adding six months was the most optimistic he could be. Each treatment came with an ever-increasing list of side effects and deteriorating quality of life. His voice seemed to fade away. Did anyone else hear that ringing noise?

“I don’t want it,” I said meekly.

“What was that?” Dr. Jones asked.

He and my father both turned towards me. I coughed and tried to clear my suddenly dry throat.

“I don’t want any of those, *treatments*.” I practically spat the last word out. “They won’t fix me, right? And they don’t sound like they will make the end any more pleasant. Besides, I haven’t noticed anything too bad yet.”

“That’s most likely true,” the doctor started.

“What?” My mother barely breathed the question.

“WHAT?!?” My father was much more expressive.

What do you mean you don't want treatment? These could potentially save your life. At least they would double it!” He turned away from me toward the doctor. “He's just a boy and doesn't know what's best for him.”

“*Could* potentially extend my life, at great personal cost,” I countered quietly.

“Do you think we spent eighteen years raising you to let you give up like this? Put you in all those sports, spent so much time and effort for you to quit? ON YOUR OWN PARENTS?” He spun back toward me.

Dr. Jones shifted, one hand partially raised, trying to get a word in. But my temper erupted before he could.

“Yeah, go ahead, throw in my face the fact that you actually had to be responsible for the kid that you had!” I shouted back at my father.

“Mary, get your things, we're leaving. We can revisit this when the boy is thinking more clearly and has had time to truly contemplate the consequences for his actions,” he stated coldly.

“Bill!”

“Mary.”

They stared at each other for a moment before my father turned and left the room.

“He's just upset,” my mother whispered to me. “You know how he gets. He just needs some time to process this. I'll talk to him. But you know that he's just mad because you're his only son, right?” Her voice was more imploring than reassuring.

I nodded stiffly. She held me tight before going after him.

“Sorry—I began but Dr. Jones quickly cut me off with a wave of his hand.

“You have nothing to apologize for. You are the victim in all this. Everyone takes this type of news differently and in their own way. I'm sure your family will come around, but grief can make people react in ways that surprise even them.”

“So, I am really dying? The treatments, they wouldn't save me?”

“Never say never, especially in this business.” He smiled weakly.

“But realistically?” I asked.

“No,” he shook his head, “they would not. At least, the chances are so slim that we cannot medically say that they could cure you. Only prolong your life. And you're not wrong, they

would not be pleasant. However, even if you are feeling few or even no symptoms now, that doesn't mean they won't come. And the end could come very swiftly."

I let out a sigh.

"Would you like to talk to someone? I can schedule you for counseling," he said.

"No thanks." The last thing I wanted to do was to talk about this even more.

I wanted to put it into the back of my mind and forget it ever happened, like I would if I failed a test in class. That was something for future me to worry about when trying to pass the final... or survive.

The next few weeks were some of the longest of my life. Every phone call home ended in the same shouting match. A revisit to that terrible day at the doctor's office. Eventually I stopped calling altogether. I didn't want to be reminded of it. Some people grew closer to their parents, especially after they moved out. That had never happened for me. I had never seen them as friends or confidants. They had always been the adults and me the child. It seemed this dynamic was doomed to never change.

Then I made things even worse. My family wanted me to drop out and spend my last few months at home. I decided to stay in school. College was where I had the best days of my life. If I only had a few months left, I wanted to spend them there, with Tom and all the new people I had met. Bring on sophomore year and the parties and drugs! Just not the prescribed kind... Just kidding, I wasn't suicidal. I started living cleaner but stuck with my choice to decline treatment.

Even my younger sister felt betrayed by this decision. I think that was the part that hurt the most. We had been very close until I left for college. I'd been so busy the last year, so focused on myself that I felt like I'd let her down the most.

Tom was the only one who stuck by me and thought I was making the best decision for me. He was also the only one who I trusted with my other reasoning for denying treatment. I was afraid it would bankrupt my family. I knew they wouldn't be able to afford all the various medical bills that came with fighting cancer. What was the point in spending all that money if I was destined to die anyway?

Fortunately I did not have to worry about living for years with family drama hanging over my head. I'd be dead and they could live with the regret of not being there for me in my last days. I knew that line of thinking was simply petty justification on my part.

Since my family insisted on spending the last of my spring semester making my life miserable, I decided to spend summer at school. Tom and I moved out of the dorms and got a college townhouse together. He covered the rent, but I helped out where I could. I spent the summer living a little over an hour but a lifetime away from the home I grew up in. I took a job at the local fitness center in town. It was easy work and helped fund my weekend extravaganzas, since the cash flow from home had suddenly ceased.

Summer passed more quickly than winter, as it tends to do. Tom was the best friend I could have ever asked for, and we grew even closer as very few other people stuck around for the summer.

As August came and went, the start of school drew ever nearer. The weather turned from stifling hot and humid to cool and livable. The leaves exploded into color, as if the trees were simulating slow motion fireworks. Students flooded back, accompanied by ever-fretting parents. They served as a stark reminder of my own situation.

Then the blur of signing up for classes, getting books, supplies, and all the other little activities that occupy your time and mind before school.

I have to admit, my preparation was lax at best. I knew I most likely would not finish the semester, depending on my condition. It looked like I was right back to what got me here in the first place. My current estimate, with no treatment, was putting my date of death in a tight race with fall finals. I was unsure which outcome I should be pulling for.

But I digress. This is where my story really begins.

A Day in the Life

By the second week of October, I had settled into a rhythm of classes in the morning and afternoon, work in early evening, then video games and bed. Maybe throw in a party on weekends, but for the most part life was really low key. I kept attending classes partly because I enjoyed the idea of learning, partly to keep meeting new girls—err *people*—and partly because a small part of me refused to accept the reality of my mortality. I still had a tiny voice telling me it was all a bad dream.

Despite that small voice, I began wearing my cancer like a cloak. It was an armor that made me impervious to the real world. Everyday worries were inconsequential to me. My attitude toward small inconveniences improved greatly, even if my outlook on life had not. No point in being depressed for your last few days, right? Besides, even if something did go wrong, I would not live long enough to have to deal with the consequences. I was carefree. This mindset gave me the courage that, until recently, I could only find in Tom's special cocktails.

Despite all this, I still hadn't worked up the nerve to talk to the girl in front of me in advanced algebra. I may have under-exaggerated how much I slacked in high school. Her name was Melissa. She had short, curly brown hair that perfectly framed her cute, circular face. The rest of her was just as short and bouncy as her hair. This was the one class I showed up to early and left late, just to see her come and go.

Every day she came in and greeted me with a brief, "Hi Ryan!" before her attention was completely absorbed by the girls to her left and right. Community college was essentially high school two-point-oh. Those who stayed on top of the latest rumors and gossip still reigned, and Melissa was queen.

Even with my impending doom, I could not come up with the courage to respond with anything more than a simple greeting. Every time she addressed me, my mouth went dry and all cleverness departed like a fleeting memory. I was left with basic function only. All I could ever manage was a short, mumbled hello. The fear of being rejected overcame even death, as it turned out. If I made a fool of myself in front of her, I knew I'd have to live with the shame, even if my days were numbered.

Tom thought I was being a huge coward, which I was. I knew if I did not make a move soon he would take matters into his own hands.

The teacher brought the class to order, and so began the daily grind, same as every other day. Math passed quickly, mostly because I spent the whole time thinking up suave-sounding conversations with Melissa that occurred in the only place they could: my own mind. Then English and Literature came along and took up two hours of my life that I'd never get back.

I usually spent the hour after English class at a local coffee shop. This particular week I was studying for a chemistry test on Monday. Most of that time I simply stared out the window with the book on my lap, hoping for some learning through osmosis. Too bad that was the closest that region had been to any real chemistry.

I ended up spending lunch there too, as my motivation to move dissipated with the relaxing atmosphere. I always did love coffee shops. The constant smell of fresh brewed coffee and toasted sandwiches, the bustle of busy workers and customers in the background... I could unwind and let my mind wander. I liked to imagine it helped me retain what I had just learned from class. Unfortunately, actually paying attention may have been a necessary precursor to letting that knowledge sink in. And day dreaming about a fictitious life probably wasn't helping.

I had one of my regular doctor's appointments that afternoon, so I eventually had to pack up and leave from my cozy booth. The doctor wanted to check up on me at least once a week to monitor my condition. I usually made it to every other appointment. Today it was either the doctor's office or Physics. Might as well skip with the excuse of a doctor visit. My teachers knew about my condition and gave me plenty of leeway. Besides, I would have hated to let any of my theoretically newfound chemistry expertise get pushed out by more information.

Fortunately, my doctor had given up on trying to convince me to pursue any treatment options. At this point he was just checking the cancer's progress. The disease was much more productive in its chemistry-related endeavors than I was. Eventually they would start prescribing pain killers to "ease the passing," but I wasn't to that point yet. Tom also had a plentiful supply of herbal supplements, if I were so inclined.

Honestly, the only signs of sickness I had experienced were a general lack of energy and getting tired more quickly at work moving the weights back to the racks. It was hard to tell how much of that was just normal laziness. But according to my doctor, it would get exponentially worse near the end. Oh well, that's what the drugs were for.

The hospital was only a mile or so from campus, so I generally walked. It was a pleasant half-hour trek through the small college town. Combined with a thirty-minute appointment, I would only have an hour to kill before work.

Campus was full of bustling students who still had some of their initial motivation left. The midterm slump hadn't hit yet. After that it would be a struggle to get to Thanksgiving. Then one last heroic push through finals to Christmas.

The local park was filled with all the usual college students: the studious groups with heads bent over books, the guitar serenades lead by Kurt Cobain wannabes, the shirtless Frisbee players, and of course many people just out to enjoy the last of the warm weather. There were even a few school clubs still out recruiting.

No fraternities or sororities though. The school was too small, and no one seemed to think graduating here was prestigious enough to warrant them. If there had been fraternities, I most likely would have never met Tom. He would have been the most recruited man on campus. So there was at least one upside. His parties were probably better anyway.

My thoughts carried me past campus and into town. The sounds of students faded behind me as I walked onward, replaced by the usual sounds of a small town. Since it was still lunch, there were only a few cars on the road. The school was a small bubble of hopes and dreams in the middle of a diminutive town in the middle of nowhere. The students still had some excitement about what lay before them, and high aspirations about where they would go. It was nice, as far as community colleges went. But even still, it was mostly locals.

Many of them were destined to end up right where they started and begin the grind of five days of work a week just to pay some bills and make ends meet. No real goals or greater meanings to their lives than living to the next day, week, month, year. Maybe that's why people had kids. Personally, I never understood the draw, but maybe it gave people who were just living to survive a sense of purpose.

It seemed to me, as I stood dying, that to continue living would lead to no more excitement or general purpose than simply leaving this existence behind. Maybe there was something after, maybe not. But just living every day to get to the weekend was no better than not living at all, in my mind.

What was the point?

Here in the real world, past the bubble of excitement that was the college campus, everyone was too busy working to simply enjoy a nice day at the park, play a sport, or join a club.

But not me. I was free from this curse. I would never have to live through such a mundane existence. Or maybe this was all just a justification I made for myself to better accept that I would never have any of this.

Even still, I smiled. This walk always helped remind me why I had chosen to enjoy my last few months, instead of fighting it out and hating my last year. My time was too precious to be spent so unpleasantly.

My contemplations led me straight to the front door of the doctor's office. I made my way inside to be met by the perfect example of my past musing. Jane, the receptionist. She was a middle-aged woman who lived up to her name. But if one day a Mary stood in her place, the hospital's patrons would have been none the wiser.

Jane was pleasant enough, though, as she greeted me and handed me a pre-formatted form to fill out. It was a completely unnecessary nuisance. All the same information they already had in their files. But I wouldn't be seen until it was completed. Another piece of bureaucracy in a world far too full of it.

I returned the offending form promptly and waited for my name to be called. It didn't take long. I was led to an empty examination room. The orderly left me there with the promise that someone would be in to see me shortly. I barely spared a glance around the room. I was already all too familiar with it. Plain wooden cabinets with a generic linoleum countertop against one wall. Another with various posters depicting diseases and their effects on the body. An examination table jutting out into the middle of the room, the familiar parchment paper covering it. The last wall had a few machines for measuring various vitals, a scale and height measurement instrument, and even more posters. These rooms had practically become a second home for me.

My normal visit was made up of a nurse coming in, taking my vitals with said machine, and making small talk. Then Dr. Jones would show up and take some blood for testing. They would tell me the results from the last tests, usually a slowly diminishing white-blood cell count and a slightly heavier prescription for all the medicine I wasn't taking. Finally, it all culminated with one last anecdotal, miracle story of some other cancer patient, somewhere else, beating

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