

Explode

“What happens to a dream deferred?”

Her heels clip-clopped around the room, a slow and steady pace like a metronome. Advanced Literature was the most difficult AP class to get into at Malcolm High, reserved mostly for juniors and seniors who proved to excel in English. But as the first few months had progressed, Lily was wondering if it had really been worth it. She had been hoping for something that would help her hone in on her writing skills so that she could perfect her essay to Northwestern University, but so far all she had learned was how many drugs Lewis Carroll had been on and why the quote “This is how the world ends” has several different meanings.

“Anyone have an idea? A guess at what might happen?”

Ms. Faulk walked in and out of rows of students with eyes half open or glazed with sleep. Her weathered face bore a permanent scowl, looking stark and malevolent beneath the fluorescent lights. She had sharp eyes like a shark—dark and beady and simply daring you to make the next move. Lily had acquired a silent fascination for the menacing woman, always listening but never daring to respond.

There was a slight pause, and then he spoke for the first time Lily could ever remember.

“It dries up.”

The creaking of chairs and hushed noises of shoes on carpet and the undeniable weight of every gaze in the room all pointed towards his chair in the back. Lily stared like the rest, eyebrows drawn close.

Samuel Knolls.

Some say he lived on the corner of 4th and Fairview in the abandoned butchery. Others say he slept most of the day because he spent his nights wandering Pittsburg in search of people to fight for no reason.

Lily knew his mother was dead.

Sam looked up from his desk, his dark eyes the color of burnt orange glaring back at the class.

“Like a raisin in the sun,” he finished, his voice hard as flint.

The rest of the class looked away, bored already, but Lily couldn’t stop staring. Ms. Faulk appraised him and class continued, her voice blending into the dull hum of the background, but Lily couldn’t focus. Sam returned the stare, burnt orange eyes trapped in her murky blue gaze.

He had two freckles on his left cheek.

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“Or does it fester like a sore and then run?”

Ms. Faulk read the words on the board aloud, enunciating each one as if it were an ancient language that deserved to be spoken with the utmost care and dignity. She sat in her chair behind her desk, the slightest of smirks on her thin lips.

“Sores will fester if you don’t treat them with care,” she remarked, the soft gray bun on her head bobbing as she spoke. “Some people think that if you let them air out for the world to see, then eventually your body will create a shield, or a scab, and if you simply let it be as it is then one day you will wake up and it will be nothing but a scar.”

Lily wore pearl earrings because they reminded her of the ocean and the salty Maine air she desperately missed. She twisted them, over and over, vaguely wondering about what Ms. Faulk was saying. She usually covered her sores with bandages, trying to protect them from any more bacteria out there until the sore went away. She always figured that was best.

“Sometimes people don’t treat sores at all,” Ms. Faulk continued, twisting the ring on her left hand the way Lily twisted her pearls, “and the sores spread, becoming a part of them that they can’t ignore.”

Lily glanced back at Sam. His face was pressed against the cool wooden desk, his eyes open but not seeing anything in the classroom. He didn’t notice Lily noticing him, and when he shifted his position in his seat he never knew that Lily saw the string of bruises that decorated his neck.

She swallowed, hard, trying not to remember the bitter cold or the sound of glass everywhere.

Her eyes darted away from him, searching for an escape but getting stuck on the stark white board. She suddenly remembered how bright blood was on snow.

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Sam fought with everyone. This was a well-known fact at Malcolm High, and if you didn’t know already, then you quickly learned to avoid the boy with the shaved head and neck tattoo. Some say he was in and out of the reformatory because he ran an underground fight club. Others say he had beaten a kid from Philly to death for looking at him for longer than three seconds. Lily had seen his dad hit him for crying at his mother’s funeral.

Ms. Faulk was at the front of the class, writing on the board in her neat, loopy cursive:

Does it stink like rotten meat? Or crust and sugar over—like a syrupy sweet?

Lily knew almost everyone had heard that Sam punched another student in the parking lot this morning. It was just before class, when everyone had already wasted as much time as possible in their cars to avoid going in and were now forcing themselves through the front doors.

Some say the kid tried to steal Sam's skateboard right out of his hands.

Others say Sam had smashed a crowbar right through the driver's side window of the kid's brand new Audi.

Lily had seen the boy lean in close to Sam's ear, a sly and cunning grin on his face, and whisper something that made Sam's body go rigid. She had never seen someone hit the ground so fast.

Lily regarded him carefully now. His knuckles were still swollen, rapidly turning the promising scarlet of a fresh bruise, but Sam was oblivious. He had his long arms crossed over his chest and his eyes glued to the world outside the window that was slowly slipping from the dark of morning to the pale gray of dawn. Lily watched, too, searching the golden skyline for the beautiful silhouette of the waking city in the distance. It was a deep comfort to Lily, knowing that despite anything that might happen, the sunrise would be consistent through it all. It made her feel like everything had a purpose.

Her eyes drifted to Sam once again, watching him the way someone might watch the news—with a heaviness in her chest, wishing there was something she could do. It was funny to her how people rarely think of others as anything more than their actions. She wondered what Samuel Knolls could be if anyone took the time for him, but she didn't think he would care to know. She doubted his dad would, either.

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It had been exactly a year since the accident. Some things pass overnight, like a storm or a dream that you can't remember when you awake. Other things don't really end, even when the cars get fixed and the shards of glass get swept off of the road. Lily must have played the scene over in her head a thousand times—the uselessness of her brakes against the ice, the fear that slid into her gut like a cold blade—but the more she thought about it the harder it was to remember what really happened. Sometimes she would see Sam and wonder why she felt her throat get tight at the sight of him and a guilty pressure behind her eyes, but then he would give her that same somber expression he had when he held his mother's body in his arms, turning his skin and the snow that unforgiveable scarlet, and Lily would suddenly feel light-headed.

Lily pinched the bridge of her nose, her blue eyes filling with tears. She'd had migraines almost every day since the accident. Her therapist mother said it was from the survivor's guilt that Lily kept repressing. Her pastor father said it was a reminder from God to forgive herself.

Lily thought she needed glasses.

Ms. Faulk wandered from the board to the window, her fragile old hands folded carefully in front of her.

"Maybe it just sags like a heavy load," she said simply.

Lily closed her eyes to ease the pain in her head.

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The sun clawed its way above the horizon and shocked the darkness away from the world, too bright. It was the kind of sunlight that exposed everything for what it was and where it hid, not caring if you were ready or not.

"Some believe that the first lines of a poem hold the most meaning. They would not be wrong, of course," Ms. Faulk paused in a stream of sunlight by the window, considering. "Some first lines, such as 'O Captain, my Captain' and 'Once more into the breach dear friends' have held fast to society, always encouraging us to push forward."

Lily wasn't listening anymore. She stared down at her hands, wondering and wondering about why things played out the way they did. She wondered if the people who wrote these poems knew that their words would last for centuries, studied by kids on the brink of everything but thinking of nothing. She wondered if it was what they wanted, or if they had to say these things because the words were beautiful poison to their bodies that would kill them if they didn't get them out.

She wondered if everyone had poison in them.

Ms. Faulk strode over to the board, writing the final lines to the poem as she said, "But others will argue that it is the last lines of a poem that define its entirety. It is the end, and if the reader remembers nothing else of the poem's life, then perhaps the last words will ring out in their memory."

Ms. Faulk turned to read out the final lines to the class, but she never did.

Shots rang out across Malcolm High, and the bursting of glass sent the students and Ms. Faulk diving under their desks. Lily moved in slow motion, the flickering lights and screams and the sound of glass raining down on them all making her migraine send splitting pain across her head. Another shot put out another light and brought down more glass, pushing up the volume

on a stereo that only blasted fear. Someone was gripping Lily's hand, trying to pull her down and keep her safe, but she wasn't ready to hide.

Some say that he had been planning this for weeks.

He was standing beside his seat in the back of the class.

Others say he had been depressed.

He stared straight at Lily, the sleek revolver weighing in his hand.

Some say he had been driven mad with rage.

He held the cool metal in his grip and pressed the gun to his temple, his hand steady.

Others say it was only a matter of time.

Sam's dark orange eyes—the same eyes that had stared at her from the passenger seat of a totaled car, the same eyes that had stared at her at his mother's funeral—stared at Lily now with a look she didn't recognize at first.

Through the blurry haze of wails and alarms, Lily only heard the final round.

For half of a heartbeat, Samuel Knolls had smiled.

Shrieks sliced through the air and one of the students at Lily's feet began to sob, but Lily could only stare at the words on the board.

What happens to a dream deferred?

Does it dry up
like a raisin in the sun?
Or fester like a sore—
And then run?
Does it stink like rotten meat?
Or crust and sugar over—
like a syrupy sweet?

Maybe it just sags
like a heavy load.

Or does it explode?

"Harlem" by Langston Hughes