

Ecclesiastes

The road to hell is paved with good intentions.

Actually, I'm pretty sure it's paved with cheap linoleum littered with chewing gum that has been walked into the ground so much that it was now part of the tiled pattern. There would be mounds of cigarette butts swept to the sides, muddled with sand and crushed pop cans. The fluorescent paneled lights in the ceiling would flicker that way they do that with either give you a migraine or an epileptic seizure. That is, if the pathway to eternal damnation had a ceiling.

This one does except it's known as the waiting room at the Han & Lewis law firm. It's more like a front for a drug operation, kind of like how it's usually a Chinese food store or something in the movies. A bit different than the gates of Hell, but pretty crappy nonetheless. Berta, the receptionist eyes me hungrily. Usually there's two or three skeezy looking people occupying the other sticky plastic chairs but today I'm awaiting judgment solo.

"How's school, Tara?" She asks, taking the lid off her thermos and pouring the clear liquid into it, and suddenly it was a shot glass. *Water... of course it's water.*

"Sara." I corrected. Berta raised her eyebrows and rolled her eyes as if I was the one drinking two hours before noon. "I graduated in June. With Lucy."

She raised her head and her plastic makeshift glass simultaneously in recognition. I watched as she slipped her feet out of the worn out sequined Uggs, the bottom of her velour tracksuit rolled at the ankles. She flexed her toes after having them released from their furry cages and nine toes gleamed back with hot pink nail

polish and an elaborate jeweled design on her only big toe. I wondered if the pedicure place gave her 10% off.

“How are your parents?” She dug again. Berta twisted her thinning hair like she was rolling a cigarette. She creased her lips so that her smokers kiss stood out in a way that made me want to invest in some preventative Olay creams.

Finally the side door opened and Berta jumped, slipping her bare feet back into her boots. “Oh good, Bridget honey, it’s just you.”

Bridget rolled her eyes. “Yeah, just me.” She adjusted the strap on her purse and her eyes reached mine. “You ready?”

I nodded and eagerly reached for the door, one more moment was far too long in the pit with Berta.

Bridget adjusted her beanie and rubbed her eyes. I could tell that those curls were still starched with last night’s hairspray and her makeup was definitely twelve hours old under the faint redusting of powder. “Late night?”

She shrugged. “Don’t get all judgey. It’s just easier to sleep here. Taketwo doesn’t bother me with his crying, and Calvin is guilt-giving me a nice quiet place to sleep.” I hated when she called the baby by that name. She claimed that her half-brother Taku was her mother’s “take-two” on a new family. Her stepdad just happened to work in a shady end of town that sucked a lot more to meet her here than at her mom’s house.

She obviously didn’t want to talk about last night, but I got the jyst. Stamp residue still marred her hand and she pushed up her sunglasses despite the skies dismal grayness. “We need to stop for coffee or something.” She turned to me and

scoffed. "I said don't give me that look! It's absolutely ridiculous that we have to get up this early on a Monday morning. Why can't we just sleep in like normal high school graduates?"

"Because it's February and normal people have started their second semester of college." I replied, moving her to the other side of the sidewalk so that she walked closest to the oncoming traffic. "We are officially do-nothing slackers. We can't even claim to be taking a semester off. And people who take a year off have jobs. We don't and so we owe this to her."

Bridget was silent for a moment. "Not that it'd make a difference if we came three hours later." The retort was gentler than she had been so far. I could tell by her face that she knew she made it sound like community service. We tried hard not to do that. She wouldn't complain anymore.

"How are your parents?" She asked. It didn't bother me the way it did when Berta did. Bridget wasn't looking for gossip. Their brand of gossip was thirty years too old for her. This was small talk.

"Alright, I guess. How's Owen?"

She scoffed. "That's over. That's like... seven guys over. Honestly, Sara." Honestly, Owen was the only name I could remember because it would be hard for a Sara Owens to forget. Bridget's other guys all just kinda melded into characters in my head. Like she was Snow White and had gone through all of the Seven Dwarves and Owen in the past three weeks.

"And what have you been up to?" She asked.

I thought of lying but there was no point. “I got Netflix. And we got OWN on our cable box.”

She lowered her sunglasses. “You’re watching Oprah reruns, seriously? Dude, you can’t even judge me. At least I’m acting like a normal nineteen-year-old. You’re acting like a ninety-year-old.” She sighed. “Stop moving away from the sidewalk, you’re going to start opening the automatic doors.” She grabbed my arm and pulled me back onto the sidewalk. I hadn’t noticed I was drifting again.

We were almost there. It was easy to tell because the buildings were getting nicer and nicer and the cars were getting more expensive. One drove by with his license plate insurance sticker peeling off.

Saint Andrews Long-Term Care Facility was tucked between two brick buildings, both taller than the middle. The face of the building was bleached white stone and the door a newly painted red with stained glass windows on either side. It always looked more like a little quaint chapel than what was essentially a long-term hospital patient overflow.

The lady at the front desk stood as the bell chimed with our entrance. “Hello girls.” Nancy greeted. Her uniform, as always, was as white as her perfectly aligned teeth and her cherry red lipstick had not a smudge. “I’ll bring you down to her.” She chirped, turning to reveal her hair, perfectly twisted and secured with a single barrette. Nancy was one of those people who you look at and know you can make on Sims with all the perfect default settings. Everything was perfectly shaped and proportioned, no weird hairs or pixels out of place. Nancy unlocked room 33 and

stepped back, her footing not wavering even in her four-inch heels. "Have a nice visit." And with that, she closed the door behind us.

Jamie's room was still the same. Six months in here and nothing different but the curtains and bedding that Mrs. McHale must have bought for her. Mrs. McHale always made sure that she never came on Mondays, that was our day. And to be honest, I'm kind of glad. Being around Mrs. McHale at the hospital was enough of her to last us the rest of our lives.

Jamie was sitting on her unmade bed, perfectly straight with a deadpan expression staring at the wall as if an episode of Grey's Anatomy was playing on the beige striped wallpaper.

"Hey Jamie." I said, squeezing her shoulder as I passed by and sat in the visitors chair by the foot of her single bed. Bridget patted Jamie's head and hoisted herself onto the window frame. I was glad that she got a room that faced only to a solid brick wall of the next building. If she was facing the streets there would be a lot more noise, and sometimes noises upset her. But you wouldn't have been able to tell. A year ago Jamie would have been slouched over some pillows, chewing four pieces of bubble gum and painting her nails while in deep conversation with Bridget about last night's episode of whatever was on the night before while me and-

"Are you going to read?" Bridget asked bluntly. Normally we start by talking to Jamie, telling her about the latest and greatest. Basically a rundown of our Facebook newsfeeds and Bridget would add updates of her conquests and then for an hour I would read out loud. The doctors all said this would help and both Bridget and I were skeptical- well, and distraught when everything had happened. But it

woke her up after a month so when she got moved to St. Andrews, we kept coming and I kept reading. Step one was for her to wake up. And while it wasn't really Jamie that stared through me like I was an extension of the windowpane blocking her view of the wall, at least her eyes were open.

I nodded, and reached into my bag pulling out the thick leather-bound book.

"You've got to be fucking kidding me." Bridget threw her head back, an over-exaggerated groan escaping her overglossed lips. "The Holy Bible? Seriously?"

I clutched it, embarrassed. "I think it would be good for all of us."

"Fuck!" Bridget repeated, eying Jamie as a parent would peek into the next room hoping their child hadn't overheard the curse. "If I wanted to find Jesus, I'd go to church. Divine Mary's is a hell of a lot closer to the office than here. And I've never walked through those doors. I wasn't planning on it before and I've got nothing to say to the big guy in the sky after what happened in July."

She huffed and flung herself back against the frame of the window. I wondered if it hurt. I wondered if she knew she had made a rhyme. I wondered why I didn't care that she was mad at me. She noticed this last part.

"Look. What's wrong with that last book you read? There's like ten more Game of Thrones books or something. They'll last us every Monday until everyone we graduated with has finished college and moved away and we can buy a hut together and whatever. I know all the boobs and stuff made you uncomfortable but you self-edited them out in your reading just beautifully. Jamie enjoyed it, I could tell. And your services are a lot cheaper than audiobooks or HBO."

I offered a smile. The reading thing worked the best. We tried bringing in her laptop and watching movies, but the doctors liked us to be social with Jamie. We even tried going on a field trip of sorts, although we thought visiting Katie's grave might bring some emotional wake up to Jamie, but it was just exhausting for Bridget and I to get her down there when neither of us have driven and I refused to get a ride. Walking is fine. Walking will suffice.

So we read.

As Bridget refuses to listen to me read the Bible, she does a dramatic reading of a girl from our grad class' Tumblr page. "Here's one entitled, My Life Sucks. Are you ready for this, Jamie? Jennica is going to write about how horrible her life is compared to everyone else's. I mean don't we have it so fucking great compared to her? I mean, Christ, she only gets to stay abroad for one more semester. Boo fucking hoo."

I roll my eyes as Bridget starts to go into the post, a surprisingly well-done imitation of Jennica's nasally voice. She is halfway into the second paragraph, ranting about how horrible it is that her flat only has wi-fi upstairs when Jamie started to mumble.

It happens a lot, she speaks to no one and mumbles words that don't exist and then out of nowhere she explodes. Bridget drops her phone onto my chair and races to grab Nancy or another nurse and I fling myself, clutching Jamie to the bed as she begins to scream, a horrible guttural, primal noise that can't be human. It's not Jamie, we're still waiting for her to come back. She flails and howls and spits, fighting against something that's not there, that doesn't exist. Or maybe it does,

maybe it's there and it's what's separating her from Bridget and I. Or maybe it's what's separating her from Katie.

With her arm, still ropey and thick from years of volleyball, Jamie flings me off her and with her other arm she sends a photo from her bedside table flying. The glass smashes against the door as it reopens with Nancy and Bridget. Nancy rushes over and Bridget picks the last photo of the four of us up off the linoleum floor.