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Ms. Stein

English P3

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Never Dream Again

“You sure you don't want to crash here for the night, man?”

A foreign voice echoes in my mind. My dry fingers rub the crust and dissociation out of my eyes. I rub my nose, clogged with the allergies that have come with the newly fallen leaves of Autumn. As the world fades back into focus, questions stack up in my mind. Why is my room so cold? Why is my bed so damned uncomfortable? Most importantly, why do I hear someone else's voice in my own room?

Scanning around lazily, the questions answer themselves rather quickly. This room doesn't belong to me at all; the pale drywall I face indicates that immediately. Further proving this, the dusty hardwood floor contrasts with my room's soft carpet. This detail also answers another question; in reality, the “bed” I lay on is the cold ground, and I'm using an acoustic guitar as a “blanket.” Finally, pushing the instrument aside and cracking my poor back, I twist my neck to reveal the source of this mystery voice. The slim half-silhouette of James looms over me, arms crossed.

Of course, this room and floor and “blanket” are owned by him. I completely forgot this house was his. Considering I've been friends with him for over two years, this was slightly surprising. At the same time, he lives about an hour away from me and I've rarely actually taken the journey to his house. The only reason I'm here today was the occasion: today was James'

birthday. After we had hung out for much of the day, I drove James back here with the intent of dropping him off, but he let me inside so I could quickly take a leak.

thin-nosed face and pink beanie are illuminated by the room's crimson LED lighting, engulfing the scene in an ominous glow. Him and I had been friends for a little over a year at this point. I met him through a separate friend group, and then got to know his people later on. We probably would've met earlier if his place hadn't been located over an hour away from my home in Gorham. He taps the side of my head with his pointer finger. "Buddy. You keep drifting off."

I sniffle. My allergies are evident in my throat. I glance at my dying phone's clock. 12:13 AM. "Christ, it's past midnight. Mom's probably pissed." I clumsily sling on my bag and jacket, slip on my famous bowling shoes, and lumber on over to the exit. Drifting in and out of consciousness, I reiterate how fine I was doing. "I'm fine, James, I'm good. Look dude, I'm good at driving. I've gone out in much worse. It'll be an adventure, you know?"

James looks at me. A little concerned, a little not. I can tell he can tell I'll be fine. "I trust you, man. Just let me know, alright? Text me when you get back." He coughs, too. One of those mucus-filled coughs you get when you're sick. I'm not the only one with Fall allergies, apparently. I take that as confirmation of his trust in me.

I feel like a small prey animal in the woods as I creep through the deep, marshy overgrowth that is his front yard. I trick myself into actually thinking I'm hiding from something in the tall grass. Why am I tricking myself? My head needs to settle down. I can't breathe through my mucus-filled nose, and the sound of my heavy mouth-breathing is all I can hear, save for a couple crickets hidden somewhere deep within the shrubs. I wish I had their energy.

Finally, after countless hours trudging through the vast grasslands of James' yard, I reach it; the glowing white beacon with pretty horrible steering and a blessing from God himself, my

wonderful 2010 GMC Acadia. My key to freedom, and my escape route from this land of grass and cold mud and crickets. Turning the key, I start up the car and glance at the clock. 12:16 AM. It had been 3 minutes.

I take a deep breath. Time must be lying. I fumble with my aux cord and crank my music up several volumes too high. I'm estimated to be in Gorham by 1:18 AM. My mind wobbles like a worm in a blender. I'm up. I reverse out of the driveway. The blaring tunes strain my eardrums, but if it's going to keep my brain in check, it is what it is. Despite the volume, my eyes can't stop closing...

I reach the highway. 12:37 AM. I open my side window. Then I open all of my windows. I put my head outside of the window. Still drifting off. I smack myself in the face. I yell at myself. "You are going to conquer this road. KEEP YOUR EYES OPEN!" My head is overwhelmed, yet as factors stack up, I get more and more used to them. This isn't working. I need to snap out of it. Wake up...

Yet, as soon as all hope to stay conscious seems lost, the tides of luck seem to shift.

Shocked awake by Zeus himself, I feel a jolt of energy. Calm, smooth, yet miraculously lively. The road shifts, but instead of throwing me off like it had earlier, it's as if it pulls me with it. The quartz that makes up the road dazzles like a kaleidoscope, creating a symphony with the stars that shine above. Dark clouds fade and reveal the deep glaring moon, shining blue, then red, then blue again, winking at me, letting me know everything's alright. Cars zoom by me, just as entranced as I am at the beauty of this night. The rolling disco ball roads criss and cross like gem-covered crucifixes. This isn't hard at all. Why did I think it was so hard?

I stare at the moon once more. It winks at me before lifting me towards itself. Extending out its hand, I smile as my gravity shifts...

12:50 AM. It all happened in 12 seconds. A large bump in the road startled me awake. My nose hit the steering wheel hard, painting my dashboard and sweatpants a deep crimson as the vehicle was dragged off the road. The next second, a large jolt accompanied by the clanging and bending and snapping of metal let me know my car was done. The crinkling of machinery in the front of the car leaked the smell of burning microplastics and rubber as the front tires let out two gunshots, exploding louder than you could ever imagine.

My car still tumbled forward at 120 miles per hour, unphased by the barrier it had passed through like butter, the barrier specifically meant to stop vehicles from falling, but it was no match. The world slowed as the car was trapped in freefall for those two seconds. Gravity left me. It was a temporary bliss.

Reality was unwavering as the car crashed into the bottom of the shallow lake below. Every bone in my body was shattered in an instant. The open windows and brand new cavities funneled water into the vessel. It's a miracle I could locate an air pocket. It's a miracle the first responders could peel me out of the wreckage.

Throughout the entire ordeal, I couldn't move anything, but I wasn't unconscious. I was confident I would never dream again. In a way, I never did.

I was pronounced permanently paralyzed from the neck down.