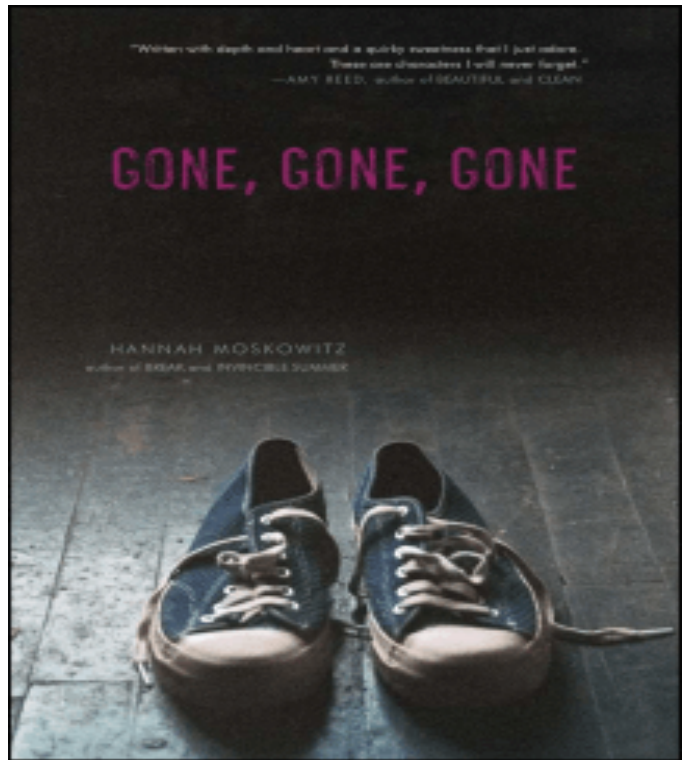


Book Review: Gone, Gone, Gone by Hannah Moskowitz

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Theo is the reason I don't like to talk. There isn't some long, drawn-out, tortured explanation. It's really pretty basic. My brother and I had the same face. My brother and I had the same voice. For some reason, he was born to talk and I was born to sing. We always knew that. For some reason, we both got cancer. For some reason, here I am. Yaaay therapy. I've been in it for seven years. That's almost half my life, and longer than any human has any excuse to be in therapy. It's a testament, at the very least, to the longevity of my . . . something. Whatever it is that's wrong with me. Not cancer. When we decided we were moving, no one even considered *not* finding me a new therapist. It was a priority nearly as high as finding a place to live. "You're a little **fucked up**, aren't you?" this therapist said in our first meeting, after she'd finished reading through my file. She'd skimmed it already, she said, but she read through it twice again while I sat there, since it was probably clear I didn't have much to say. She then told me I was a little **fucked up**, and I decided I liked her. Her name is Adelle. We've been meeting for two months now, so, in therapist- time, we're basically best friends. She's not so hard to talk to, probably because I know she can't get bored of me and walk away. She doesn't care that there isn't much to me. She still gets paid. So today I tell her about Craig, and looking for the animals, and kissing him. She says she didn't know I was gay. I say that's pretty stupid, since I've definitely mentioned my Gerard Butler dreams, and did she think those were purely metaphorical? "I was practically there when that man got shot," I say. "Really. In Glenmont today?"

I don't feel six months younger than Lio. I mean, I can deal with my life and stuff. And I've had a boyfriend and Lio hasn't, as far as I know. Or a girlfriend. So really, I'm older in a lot of ways. I should sleep. It's been quiet upstairs for ages. I was a wreck in school today. Nearly started crying in algebra just because I couldn't figure out the next step in this proof, which is really unacceptable behavior. I was falling asleep all through history, and now I'm awake like someone's electroshocked me. Cody was older than me too. Nearly a year. Cody Cody Cody. Why didn't I get an email from him tonight? Usually he

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emails every night. Every single night, around nine o'clock. And I respond faster than I can breathe. He didn't email tonight, for the first time since he's been gone. I'm trying to act like this is something I've just realized while I've been lying here watching the in- fomerical, acting like it hasn't been chewing on my thoughts ever since I checked my email and it was only Lio. Pretending there's this vague possibility that Cody wasn't the first thing I thought about for once. Damn it. I drag my laptop in front of the TV and boot up an old email from him, from a few weeks ago. *Craig— To die by your side, baby. I heard that song today and it reminded me of I mean Still mad at you. Mad at you forever. Fuck you, Craig, fuck you and everything you did. Love, C*

Like, I know it's three in the morning and you're probably asleep, but what the fuck, why did you stop emailing? Fuck you, Cody. Fuck you. You know maybe someday I want to have a real relationship, did this never ending cycling fucking fear that the guy is going to die any second, of a gunshot wound or a fucking self-inflicted gunshot wound or of grief or of cancer. Maybe I actually want to move on from our little fucking eighth-grade whatever and actually be- cause Jesus how fucking lame is it but no matter what I still want you. I'm not moving on because I want you. And I'm not getting over you because I don't know what the fuck happens after I get over you and I don't want to be left here alone again, okay? Maybe maybe I want someone to stick around, because being the one left behind fucking blows, and I get that it's not like you're having an easy time either, but you should at least have the decency to answer my emails, because it's thanks to me that you're even at that school and not dead right now, did you even think of that? Did you ever thank me for taking care of you all that time? I love you, you fucking idiot, and I love you crazy and I love you sane, so will you please answer my emails? That's all I'm asking from you, I'm not asking for your love or your brain or your fucking future although, let's be honest, I'd take them all, I'd take them all and I'd keep them safe, just like I'll keep you safe even though I don't think I'm supposed to have to do that, I don't think that's how relationships work, one person taking care of the other one all the time, but damn it I'll do it, Cody, but you have to answer my emails. You fucking have to. Fuck you, Cody, answer me. ANSWER ME. I JUST FUCKED EVERYTHING UP FOR YOU AND YOU WILL NEVER EVEN CARE. Love, C

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I say, "I'm surprised you even ride buses." I try not to sound jealous that he's still going to school. "Are the windows made of bulletproof glass?" "Ha ha ha. Seriously, you have no idea what it's like. It's like . . . Christmas." "Third base is Christmas?" "Pussy is Christmas." Ew. I hate that word. Like girls have animals in their pants or something. I have no desire to know what girls have in their pants but I do really hope none of it is alive, and I don't think even newborn kittens in a girl's pants could make me go down there. This is so gross. Why am I still thinking about this? I hate karate. Afterward, when I'm safely in my mom's car where no bullets can ever get me, Mom pulls up at our house and says, "Is that Lio?" Yes, that's Lio. He's standing at my door, shaking a little, looking around nervously. I give him a quick hug, and his heart's beating so fast. "You okay?" He nods. "Did our car scare you?" He nods again. "Shit, I'm sorry." I scared him. What is he doing here? He says, softly, "Jasper had to drop me off. She couldn't wait." "Oh, um, okay." I let him into the house. "Here. I'll get you something to drink." Now that he's inside, he's calming down. He takes off his jacket, and his skin is that plain ghost white, his collar too high to show the scar on his chest, and his skin is probably fifteen shades lighter than mine, and I know there are a shitload of people in the world with lighter skin than mine and it's really nothing I'm generally excited about or anything, but his feels sort of like a miracle right now, I can't explain it. It's just that every single thing about him is a miracle.

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Dad finally comes home with a stack of papers, rubbing the headache between his eyes. Parents are calling him like crazy, he says, all of them demanding that he promise their kids will be safe, like that's something Dad can tell them. We eat a late dinner, and I should do my homework but I don't, and I should sleep but I don't, and while we're sitting around chewing on our cold, gummy pizza, a man is killed crossing the street in Washington, D.C. Wha-pam, long-range bullet, dead body. I email the boy I shouldn't instead of the boy I should. Because there is nothing from Cody in my inbox. Nothing, nothing, nothing. *Lio— I don't know why you have to be a jackass all the time. It didn't used to be like this. Craig _____ Craig— We didn't used to know each other. I'm a jackass sometimes. It's not really all the time. You'll deal. Lio _____ Lio— I wish you would call me. I wish you talked. You don't think anyone's going to shoot an animal, right?* She says, "Okay, honey, I'm sorry. God, don't ever make that face at me again." She hugs me, but I don't know what face I'm making, because I didn't mean to make a face. Maybe my normal face is just a really sad face, and how shitty would that be? But the point is that I'm not going to stop looking for the animals, because they are mine and they are counting on me. When I get out of the car, all these teachers and parent volunteers sweep in and form a pod around me until I reach the building. It's claustrophobic and annoying and I'm fifteen and I can take care of myself. I'm doodling in American Civilizations when Mr. Spavich sets aside his lesson plan and says, "Okay. Do you want to talk about what's going on?" We all look at him like we don't know what he's talking about. "Are your parents afraid to pump gas?" he asks. "All of a sudden, that seems like a risky activity, doesn't it?" We don't look at each other. Mr. Spavich says, "Guys. It's okay to be scared." Marisabel says, "If we're scared, the terrorists win. Isn't that what everyone said after September eleventh?" "This isn't terrorists," Lio says under his breath. He's sitting next to me, wearing these fingerless gloves that make him look like a badass. After his email last night, I have no idea what to say to him. And I guess he's forgiven for kissing me, but I guess I still have that

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headache. Dennis says, “Well, my parents are paying my brother to pump gas for them, which is kind of disgusting. Like, it’s all well and good if he’s the one who gets shot, we get it.” “There are articles online, now,” Marisabel says. “Like, ‘How Not To Get Shot While Pumping Gas.’ People are getting paid to tell us how to not get randomly shot.”

Naomi never gets hurt. She doesn’t understand. I think she’s irritated until she does that nose-wrinkle. “Look, we’re not talking spinal damage or something here, right? Because I’m going to feel really **shitty** about helping you in your little mission if you end up with spinal damage.” I kick her to demonstrate my un-paralysis. She smiles. “**Smart-ass.**” I breathe in and my chest kicks. “Hey. I think it’s the ribs.” Naomi pulls up my T-shirt and checks my chest. While she takes care of that, I wiggle all my fingers around, just to check. They’re fine—untouched except for scrapes from the pavement. I dig a few rocks from underneath a nail. “I’m guessing two broken ribs,” she says. “Two?” “Yeah. Both on the right.” I nod, gulping against the third feeling—nausea. “Jonah?” I ignore her and struggle to distract myself. Add today to the total, and that’s 2 femurs + 1 elbow + 1 collarbone + 1 foot + 4 fingers + 1 ankle + 2 toes + 1 kneecap + 1 fibula + 1 wrist + 2 ribs. = 17 broken bones. 189 to go. Naomi looks left to the 7-Eleven. “If we don’t get out of here soon, someone’s going to want to know if you’re okay. And then we’ll have to find another gross parking lot for next time.” “Relax. I’m not doing any more skateboard crashes.” “Oh, yeah?” “Enough with the skateboard. We’ve got to be more creative next time, or your video’s gonna get boring.”

My stomach clenches. I gasp, and it kills. “**Shit**, Nom.” “You’re okay.” “I’m gonna puke.” “Push through this. Come on. You’re a big boy.” Any other time, I would tease her mercilessly for this comment. And she knows it. **Damn** this girl. I’m upright, but that’s about as far as I’m going to go. I lean against the grody wall of the Laundromat. “Just bring the car around. I can’t walk that far.” She makes her **hard-ass** face. “There’s nothing wrong with your legs. I’m not going to baby you.” My mouth tastes like cat litter. “Nom.” She shakes her hair and shoves down the brim of her cap. “You really do look like crap.” She always expects me to enjoy this part. She thinks a boy who likes breaking bones has to like the pain. Yeah. Just like Indiana Jones loves those **damn** snakes. I do begging eyes. “All right,” she says. “I’ll

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get the car. Keep your ribs on.” This is Naomi’s idea of funny. She slouches off. I watch her blur into a lump of sweatshirt, baseball cap, and oversize jeans. **Shit**. Feeling number four is worry. Problems carpet bomb my brain. What am I going to tell my parents? How is this setting a good example for Jesse? What the **hell** am I doing in the grossest parking lot in the city on a Tuesday night? The feeling that never comes is regret. There’s no room. Because you know you’re three bones closer.

They’re probably safer here than in Pittsburgh, if you take air pollution into account, and the fact that if you trip in Pittsburgh you’ll probably get, like, speared through by a fucking piece of steel or some **shit** like that. No emails from anybody, except that old one from Lio still sitting in my inbox. I’ll answer it later, I will, I will I will I will. That movie we wanted to see, *Phone Booth*? *They’re postponing the release because they think it’ll be too upsetting this close to the shootings. I bet Lio’s really pissed off and confused about that, because even I can’t believe the rest of the country even knows about the shootings, since I bet the same number of people have died in every single state in the United States this week, probably more, so God knows why they’re postponing a movie because of us. I really am starting to sound like Lio, I think, and I wonder if that means I’m starting to think like him too. I’m wondering what it’s like in Lio’s head.* The shootings are on the news stations, all the time, which is how I guess the whole world knows. It’s like, weather, sniper, sports, sniper, international, sniper, local? No, local means more sniper. Can’t they report something different? It’s been days since anyone was shot, and I really don’t need to think about this all the time, but it’s getting to be like a song that’s stuck in my head, which is such a crude way of putting something where people are dying, I know, but with the news stories and ads for bulletproof vests and my father’s phone ringing again and again, it’s not as if I’m the first one making this vulgar. *Li— I don’t know what to say to you. You were really an **asshole**. You’re probably still really an **asshole** while you’re reading this. I guess D.C. is more important to me not even because of Cody’s dad, but because it was D.C. and that was where I was. But it did suck about Cody’s dad. But you didn’t know that.*

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“Hey, Dad,” he says after a minute. “How’s Michelle?” He’s quiet for a long time. I wonder if his dad is talking this whole time or if there are long pauses where he waits for Lio to speak. And then he keeps asking about Michelle, again and again, like each time his dad isn’t giving him enough of an answer, or isn’t giving him the answer he wants. And I remember when we first started talking, over IM. **Liodore: you have siblings? ThisIsntSparta: a brother Liodore: how many? ThisIsntSparta: 1? Liodore: must be weird ThisIsntSparta: how many sisters do you have? Liodore: a million see, theyre kinda my whole world** Now I’m sitting here watching him nod at the phone and beg for more information on the sister that he wanted to be with, that he skipped school to be with, and I’m thinking that I should have just made the U-turn. It’s no good if I want him to be here more than he does, that’s not how this can work. I need more of a push than that. He shouldn’t be here. **Shit shit shit shit** what am I doing? Then Lio tells his dad, “I’m at Craig’s,” and I can tell by the way he says my name that he’s told his father about me. I feel kind of obnoxiously happy. “I’m totally safe,” he says. “We’re right by the school . . .” He closes his eyes for a second. “I know. I know.” He seems smaller than usual when he talks to his father. Not in a bad way, just a younger one. I wonder if everyone gets younger when they talk to their parents. I spend too much time around mine. I need to get out of the house more.

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Anyway, when Cody grew up, or I grew up and he stayed small, he turned into some kind of a big deal—a fantastic soccer player, a huge smile, a personality that seemed like it must have eaten bits of other people’s to get that big, like a very hun- gry caterpillar. He was so much more than alive. He always was. Our first kiss was in fourth grade for me and fifth grade for him, when we were playing hide-and- seek. I said if I found him in less than two minutes, I got to kiss him. I don’t remember what happened if I didn’t. But I found him in a minute and forty-two seconds, roughly, and he was inside this old chest that holds all these old clothes that my grandmother draped all over herself before she died, and I pulled him out of the chest and he was shrouded in turquoise and gold and I kissed him. We waited until I turned fifteen because even we thought it was a little weird to have sex at fourteen, and he was sixteen and really not okay with having sex with a middle schooler, so that was the summer before ninth grade for me, and the sum- mer before tenth grade for him, and he was almost sixteen, and that was our sum- mer. It was so ours, that whole summer. It was awkward and difficult and painful at first, but he loved me and we were re- ally gentle, and then it got good. Really good. It got closer to the movies than anti- septic health class told me it ever could. So fuck health class and fuck the preachy advice your parents give you, because sex didn’t ruin our relationship. It’s not that. Although I can see, from an objective standpoint, that maybe I was too young, but is that really the point at all? Why the hell should I see things from an objective standpoint? I’m not objective, I mean, this is my life. And if we stop having sex, the terrorists win, right?

LIO’S DAD DRIVES JASPER OVER ABOUT AN HOUR AFTER dinner. He stays in the car while she comes in, which I can tell Lio doesn’t feel right about, because he keeps looking out the window at his dad in the car. “Is he mad at me?” he says eventually. “He didn’t sound mad on the phone.” “I don’t know. My keys?” She takes them from Lio and hands him a small bag. “Toothbrush and shit.” “Why isn’t Dad with Michelle?” “How the hell was I supposed to get here without him? And she’s sleeping in the

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backseat.” “Oh.” He’s still peering out the window. I can see his little sister’s feet in the backseat. They’re in socks and curled up against the window. Jasper says, “I told him he doesn’t get to chew you out about the car when Craig’s here. So he thought it’d be best to stay outside. I think I finally got it through his head that Craig’s . . . you know.” Lio keeps frowning, but then his dad waves at him, and his face lights like a candle.

“Okay.” “Hey.” Jasper takes Lio’s shoulder and yanks him around. “I didn’t say *I* wouldn’t chew you out in front of Craig.” I swear he shrinks like five inches. She says, “You ever do that again, I’ll skin ya.” He nods. She lets her air out and pushes Lio’s hair back. “You sure you don’t want to come home?” They’re both speaking in these really quiet voices, but it doesn’t sound like they don’t want us to hear. They’re standing in the middle of our kitchen, after all. It sounds like they’re being gentle with each other. Lio nods, looking down. “We’re worried about you.”

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You're straight, aren't you?" He chuckles in that way again. "Yeah, I put the S in GSA." I snap my fingers like, "damn it." He's still smiling. "I'm too old for you anyway." And then he gives me a hug. He asks me how I'm coping with freshman year. I make a face and hit him. Then he asks how I'm coping with the shootings. I give him my usual one-word answers, but he says, out of nowhere, "You're used to saying a lot with your eyes, aren't you?" It scares me, being noticed. But I nod. Because I like that I didn't have to play the dead brother card or the cancer card for him to understand that there's stuff I'm not saying. Sometimes, it's nice to remember that I have stuff I'm not saying. Maybe I'm not as talked out as I thought. Because there are things I should have said last night when Craig was telling me that he wasn't ready, and telling me that *I* wasn't ready. I should have said: *It's up to me whether I'm okay with the possibility of being broken. Plus, I'm a tough little son of a bitch, and don't you forget it. If you really don't want to be with me, you cannot slide out of it sideways. You have to mean it. Tomorrow is the one-week anniversary of realizing I'm in love with you.* I catch my breath. I should have said something. And this is maybe the first time I have ever really meant that. Jack says, "You okay?" "Thinking about a boy." And then Jack makes me talk about Craig. And I do. I tell him everything. "Yeah," Jack says. "You need to fight for this boy."

MICHELLE HOLDS MY HAND LIKE I'M HER MOM IN A supermarket. This would be okay, except Michelle looks old for her age and I look young. So people probably think we're dating. Ugh. We pass the enormous blue crab statue and stand in line to go through the metal detectors so we can get x-rayed and inspected and prodded and studied and excavated and all that. Security takes a million years longer than it used to. I have to take off my hat. The TSA guys are all giving me funny looks. Do I really look like a terrorist? I guess no one knows what a terrorist looks like anymore. Maybe leaving is a mistake. I give Michelle's hand a quick squeeze. It was more for me than for her, but she clings in a way I didn't expect. She puts her bag on the conveyor belt and steps through the metal detector. I keep watching her

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until she's all the way through. When we get to the gate, she sits down and wrings her hands. "Are you worried about the flight?" I say. We haven't flown in so long. But driving from New York to Maryland is, we discovered on the move, sort of a **bitch**. And not an endearing **bitch** like Craig. She shakes her head. My phone buzzes, and I check the number. Jack. I hit ignore. We're boarding any minute, so I dig a pen out of my pocket and write CALL JACK on the inside of my arm. "Look who's so popular all of a sudden," Michelle says. She's still attacking her hand with her other hand. I say, "You okay?" "I want to get out of here. Like, now. Right now. I want to get the fuck out of Washington, D.C., and back to New York." This is Maryland. "I know." She says, "We haven't seen Mom together since . . . what, Christmas?"

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“Are there any nice boys at school?” he says, in that way, and I guess I should be thankful that he says this no differently from how he asks Todd about girls at work, but I’m not, I just want him to pretend I’m a eunuch or something, especially since I pretty much am at this point, anyway. Mom gives him a stern look. “We’ll find them.” She looks at me. “You know, your friend could have stayed for dinner.” Now she’s totally giving me a chance to tell her that Lio’s more than a friend, and I have no idea what to say. The fact that my parents are entirely okay with **my homosexuality** makes talking about it kind of difficult, because when you’re gay and single the only thing you have going for you is imagined shock value. The reality is that it’s pretty boring to be like, *hey, parents, I’m **gay**, and there’s absolutely no reason for you to give a **shit** right now.* So I just say, “That’s okay,” and concentrate on cutting my pork chop. And to be honest, calling Lio my friend seems wrong, probably because I don’t remember, really, how to have friends. That sounds so pathetic, because I used to have friends, but then I had a boyfriend and sort of ignored everybody, and then after the boyfriend exploded I stopped being fun and started blowing people off when they asked me to hang out. It’s not like everyone hates me, and I have people to talk to in classes but not once we’re out in the halls, those sorts of friends. And I spend a lot of evenings here with the animals, and they were enough, in a way my parents could never appreciate and could barely tolerate. Now what? Now I don’t know, I guess maybe Lio’s my new animal. And Sand- wick, of course. And Zipper. I should make a picture book about us or something. Two teenage boys and two animals—this is the 2002 version of the blended family. I can’t believe I’m thinking of him as a familial candidate. I mean, come on, I barely know the kid. What do we even do together? Sometimes we go skate- boarding because, I don’t know, I guess we think we’re eleven. He smokes clove cigarettes and I pretend I don’t hate the smell. We drink Slurpees and . . . we do stuff like push each other on gates, I guess. I wish I knew what was going on.

While I’m typing that, my email dings as a new message comes in. *Craiger— I want to apologize for*

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*leaving last night. And for creeping into your room. Basically I'm just sorry for being such a creeper all the time. School was lame. Hope you enjoyed your day off and you didn't get shot or anything. Oh, sniper humor. Have you watched the news? They're doing all these videos about how to not get shot when you're pumping gas. Informative. Duck if you see a white van. Or if you're pumping gas. Better yet, don't pump gas, okay? But if you do, you bob around a lot and try to stay behind your car. Thank me later, when you're still alive. Stay alive, Craig, okay? Don't get cancer. So I don't know what decision we came to, last night, really, and I'm confused, so . . . here's what I think is going to work out best for you. Here it comes. Essentially, I'm not going to bother you anymore. I don't mean this in like an emo way, though it probably sounds that way to you. I wouldn't blame you for thinking that. You haven't seen much of my ability to make friends. But I swear I can do it. I had a whole posse of gay boys in New York. And I think my father might still think I'm straight. I don't even think he's trying to deny it, I think he really is just that clueless. So he'll probably match me up with a nice Jewish girl soon, and there's a friend. Anyway, I'm not even sure if there are any fabulous Jews or **homosexuals** at our school, but rest assured that if there are, I will find them. By Friday they will be my babies. Mark it.*

Its lights are off. It comes toward me. It has tinted windows and I can't see the driver. I straighten up. It drives past me, wheels clanking. I can hear the torn-up tar on the sides of the sidewalk crunching under the tires. It gives me a half second of a heart attack, and then it's gone. That's what it left me with, a **fucking** half-second heart attack

and then my heartbeat back and loud and clear, going *you're stupid you're stupid you're stupid*. I stay out to see the sunrise, and when I get home . . . oh **shit**. My parents, both of them in their flannel pajamas, the ones I guess they wear when they're not going to have **sex**. I wish they'd had **sex**. That's really gross, but maybe they wouldn't be glaring at me if they had. But they probably would be. I think adults can probably have **sex** and a life at the same time, which is sort of a foreign concept for me. "Where the **hell** were you?" my dad says. I hold up the dog leashes. My father says, "**Jesus**, Craig. Can you really be this incredibly oblivious?" "I'm not oblivious. I'm also not going to let my dogs, like, atrophy because a few people have been

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shot.” “A few *innocent people!*” my father says. “A few people who were shot for absolutely no reason except for where they happened to be.” But . . . but, no, I’m calling **bullshit**, because entire lives are determined by where we happen to be. It’s the only reason we care about the cities we care about. God, it’s the only reason we fall in love. It’s where you happen to be. I’m not going to spend my whole life **fucking** freaking out about it. “I’m not going to get shot,” I say. “You’re not actually sitting here thinking that I’m going to get shot, come on.” Mom has her head in her hands. She says, “I know you’re not. But you scared your father and me to death.”

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My phone buzzes. I answer. It's Craig. "Hey, baby," I say. "It's kinda late but I still miss youuuuu." Shawn and Tino find two sticks and start pretending they're Luke and Darth Vader. I can't figure out which one is which. He says, "Lio." His voice is really quiet. Is he crying? That's so sad. I don't want him to cry when I'm not there. "I need to talk to you." "Kay. Shoot." "I'm with Cody right now." Before my mouth was on fire from the Jack Daniel's, and now it feels like I'm chewing ice. "What?" "I'm at his school. He's having an open house and I came to see him." "Why . . . why did you do that?" "I don't know. He's in the bathroom right now, and I just need to . . ."

"He's changed. *Tell me that.* It's been so long. He's gone and away and now you're with me." "I'm with you. Listen to me, Lio, I'm with you. I'm just . . . I'm confused, and I didn't think it was fair not to tell you, and he hasn't changed, and I don't know if I've changed either." I feel my heart rising up my chest. "*I've changed! That's not fair! I've changed! I'm talking to you!* You can't *tell me nothing's changed when here I am talking to you!* Why didn't you tell me you were going to see him?" "Lio. Calm down." "*Listen to me! I'm talking to you!*" Shawn and Tino are all, "Whoa, listen to Lio all noisy." "You're **drunk**." Craig's voice is hard. "This doesn't exactly count as you being really brave or something." "Oh, GO **FUCK YOUR BOYFRIEND!**" I slam the two halves of my phone together. He left. He's with Cody. I went away to New York for a few fucking days, and he goes back too. To his New York. I'm not making sense. But none of this is okay.

I can't freak out and regress. I can't do that because there is no going back for me. I can't use the shit that's happened to me as an excuse to pretend I don't have a boyfriend who gets hurt when I freak out, because I didn't have anything when I didn't have a boyfriend. I had this city and this city will never be the same and it's not because of September 11th and it's not because of the sniper, it's because of Dad and Jasper and Craig and Craig's parents and his **goddamn** brother and Jack and *home*. I'm here and the towers are gone and the people are dead and there's Craig, and he doesn't give a **fuck**, and no one he's

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given a **shit** about has ever died, Christ, the boy has five grandparents because one of them got divorced and remarried, and what the fuck does he know about anything, and he and Cody should probably just get together and make out because Jesus they're both going to be around forever so what's even the **fucking** point of cancer boys like me cancer boy cancer boy can- cer boy. "Give." I hold out my hand. I keep it out until Tino gives me the bottle, and I drink and drink and drink until Shawn pulls my arm away. "Stop," he says, and he hits me on the back because I guess I'm coughing. There's Jack Daniel's coming out my nose. "I want to dance," I say. Shawn knows a guy who knows a guy who blew a guy and we're in the club no problem. I chain-smoke until my lungs threaten to catch fire. We have Xs on our hands so we can't buy drinks. Big deal. We don't even have any money. And we're already **drunk**. Who gives a **shit**? No one I know. "Have you heard about the shooting guy?" I ask this boy who's dancing with me. He's tall and looks like Craig. Here I go looking for Craig in everyone. This is the beginning of the end. Kiss me kiss me kiss me. He is not a boy. He is at least twenty-five and I like every year of him. He says, "What?" "They're calling him the betro sniper," I say. "No. Betro's not a word. Beltway sniper. Not metro. Beltway sniper."

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He's only my friend on the weekends, because we don't go to the same school and we don't care enough to track each other down. But on Saturdays we have karate together, so after that we usually get Slurpees or some- thing. His name is Mansfield, which is one of the most unfortunate things I've ever experienced. He's not very good at karate, either. I don't know why he's in my class, but there are only six other kids in the class with us, so maybe they'd feel too bad about dumping him. Anyway, it's not like I'm great at karate. We're probably the failure class and no one cared to tell us, but I still like doing it. It keeps me from being an angry young man, I guess. After class we pack up our shit and I ask him if he wants to walk to the 7-Eleven, and he says, "I don't know, Craig. I don't know if this is the perfect week to be walking around looking for a Slurpee, you know?" What the fuck? I say, "Come on, it's like half a block." "It's right by a gas station." "Yeah . . . ?" Mansfield looks at me. "Come on, Craig, don't play dumb. That's where every- one's getting shot: gas stations and parking lots. I don't want to die before I have sex." "So I'm home free, then." I give him this big smile, and Mansfield looks at me with this face, and it's so worth him thinking I'm straight if it makes him this jeal- ous of me. Heh. I mean, he could always be jealous of the fact that I've slept with a boy, too, or also that I own him at karate, or that I'm not too afraid to get a Slurpee, but this is easier. So I think, whatever, I'll go get a Slurpee myself, it's not as if I really value Mans- field's company. But when I walk out of the karate studio, there's my mom, station wagon idling in front of the place, and she says, "Craig, come on, hurry into the car." **Jesus Christ**. It makes me want to wear fluorescent pink clothing and jump up and down.

I say, "Can you drive?" Craig looks at me for a second. "Are we talking?" "Please?" "You're talking." He looks at me, down his nose, like he's doing it to remind me how short I am. How does he do that? How does he make me care? I'm used to being this height. How does he make me feel so small? He says, "Why are you talking to me? **Jesus**, what do you want, Lio? I already feel like shit." I guess I thought . . . the emails . . . I guess I thought we were okay. He says, "I'm sorry I assumed New York was some kind

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of haven of personal growth and identity and community wellness or something. Because . . . well, clearly you came from there, so I guess it has to be at least a little—” “—fucked up,” I finish, quietly. He’s really surprised I interrupted him. “Yeah.” He clears his throat. “A little fucked up.” He looks away and finishes taking books out of his locker. I hope he doesn’t cry. I think it’s adorable how much he cries, but I can’t deal with any more crying today. That’s probably why I’m not doing it. I say, “I need to get home.” He looks at me. “What’s up?” “The kid who got shot goes to my sister’s school. I don’t . . . I don’t think she saw anything. But she’s really freaked out. Dad went to get her. I feel like I should be home.” I’m panting. I force the keys into his hands. Craig puts his hand on my arm and looks down at the keys. “I can’t drive.” He showed me his learner’s permit the day he got it. He was so proud. I say, “You’re better than I am.” He nods a little. “Okay. Come on.”

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We can talk about me getting all cougar (you're more than six months younger than me, you know) on you if you want. Or we can pretend that it's just that thing where two gay boys kiss because they're the only two gay boys around. Like on sitcoms. And then we adopt a Vietnamese baby. I'm not delusional enough to think this is a sitcom. It's not like I have wedding bands picked out or something. See you tomorrow. Lio I'm not sure I can deal with this tonight. The self-awareness of it is kind of killing me—how many times did Lio edit this email? It's so fucking carefully constructed, and that's not the kind of thing I can handle, so I always just reply as fast as I can without thinking and right now I'm just so tired. And the part about his brother is the worst, because I'd totally talk to him about it, I'd love to talk to him about it, I live to drink up other people's problems and pee them out and probably drink them again, knowing me, though it's not like that turns me on or whatever, but if it did I'd know just the websites because insomnia is ridiculous. But anyway, no matter how many times Lio says "Yeah, we'll talk," the bottom line is, the kid doesn't talk, and I want him to, because I'd like to see what he says when he doesn't edit. I want to see if it's beautiful, because right now I don't know. Or we could . . . use our mouths for other things, is I guess what I'm trying to say. I mean, if that's easier for him. Or if it's even possible for me, in my current state of eunuch. **God**, I'm so tired, and I don't know what I want, which is probably why kissing seems like the best option, but it sounds like he doesn't even want to kiss me anymore, so now I don't even know. I should go to sleep, I guess.

That's my part of me that's "a little fucked up," I guess. If we can divide ourselves up that way. I have Cody and the fact that I don't sleep. And the animals, though I guess they're all connected or some **shit** like that. **God**, I should go to therapy with Lio. I bet she'd have a field day between the two of us. And then we'd get better, because I guess that's the point of therapy, and then what? And what happens when you don't get better? I know the answer to that and it's not something I want to happen to me. Or Lio. Although I guess he probably knows more than I do about not getting better, but the more I get to know

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Lio, the more I learn that you can't use cancer as a metaphor for real life. I flop down on my couch and turn on the TV. Sandwich walks in a circle on my back like a dog before she settles down. I hear my parents walking around upstairs, shutting off the lights and double-checking all the locks on the doors before they go to bed. The windows are already fixed, because it's not safe to have all that broken glass around when there are animals. I can hear my brother getting ready for the suicide hotline job. He likes it, even though the pay is shitty and it's about people killing themselves. He says he likes to help. My family is all full of beautiful people who care about everyone they don't know, and then we can't even get along most of the time. I think it's gotten to the extent that, if we were going to kill ourselves, none of us would think to call my brother for help first, and isn't that just the most pathetic thing in the whole world? The man on the TV talks about a big jigsaw puzzle I can buy for four payments of something—no, three payments of something, special TV offer, I need to call right now. I don't even have a phone with me. I am a waste of his infomercial. There's no way he could make money off of me, and I feel really guilty about that. Also, I sort of don't understand TV, in that way. Why do ratings matter? Do people get money when I watch their show? What about when I turn a show off in the middle? I guess I'm not part of that eighteen-to-thirty-five age group, or whatever it is everyone gives a shit about, so it probably doesn't matter. I barely matter, if you're looking at numbers—what's a fifteen-year-old?

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I got the word “zombie” from my brother Todd. He calls me “zombie,” some- times, when he comes home from work at three in the morning—Todd is so old, old enough to work night shifts and drink coffee without sugar—and comes down to the basement to check on me. He walks slowly, one hand on the banister, a page of the newspaper crinkling in his hand. He won’t flick on the light, just in case I’m asleep, and there I am, I’m on the couch, a cat on each of my shoulders and a man with a small penis on the TV telling me how he became a man with a big penis, and I can too. “Zombie,” Todd will say softly, a hand on top of my head. “Go to sleep.” Todd has this way of being affectionate that I see but usually don’t feel. I say, “Someday I might need this.” “The penis product?” “Yes.” Maybe not. I think my glory days are behind me. I am fifteen years old, and all I have is the vague hope that, someday, someone somewhere will once again care about my penis and whether it is big or small. The cats don’t care. Neither do my four dogs, my three rabbits, my guinea pig, or even the bird I call Flamingo because he stands on one leg when he drinks, even though that isn’t his real name, which is Fernando. They don’t care. And even if they did, they’re not here. I can’t avoid that fact any longer.

So, I should say no, but apparently my *no thanks I’m fine* disease doesn’t apply here. I say, “Let me ask my dad, okay?” That is the worst thing I’ve ever said. I essentially just cut off my penis. I say, “We might have plans. I can get out of them.” I realize I’m trying to com- pensate for what I said about asking Dad for permission. I’m trying to get her

to think I might be cool. *Way to go. Woo back the straight girl.* Jesus, I can’t win. “Oh, sure,” she says. “Just call me back?” “Yeah. Um, I’ll IM you.” I hang up because I sound like a jackass and that shit needs to end.

So I said *okay*. But then I saw him. His hair might not be golden blond—he’s black, so that would be a little weird—but his eyes kind of are. That zip-up red hoodie he wears makes him look like he just got back from apple picking. And God I need to shut up because I might be growing a vagina. Adelle says,

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“Lio?”

“Weird it made the news,” Todd said. “People get shot all the time.” My father says, “Not while they’re shopping,” which is pretty representative of his world view. My dad’s old enough that even September 11th didn’t change his mind that **violence** only happens to **violent** people. The only people who get stabbed are in gangs. The only people who get shot, shot someone else first. As much as my bleeding heart wants to convince him this is wrong, the truth is most of the **violence** here *is* revenge-driven or gang-related. I should know, I mean, I go to public school. The first shooting was at 5:20. That was when Lio kissed me, that was the exact minute. I know because I checked my watch afterward because I wanted to see how long it lasted, then I realized I hadn’t checked my watch before he kissed me, so I’d never know. But I don’t think it was very long, really.

My parents always thought I was so stupid and I thought I was so lucky keeping my guinea pig and my cats and my dogs and my bird together and no one ever had to be in a cage and no one was ever locked up and no one ever hurt anybody. It was like a little miracle, and then someone broke through our doors and left every- thing open and they all ran away together, and that’s why I don’t have any animals. The breaking-in, the breaking the windows, the breaking apart, the **violence**, none of that had anything to do with it. They only left because the door was open. Just freedom had to do with it, or maybe fear, and that’s all that mattered in the end, and I fall asleep sitting up and wake up a minute later, and these are the times when I don’t believe that all the animals are ever going to be not gone. “Weren’t you happy here?” I whisper. I tried. I tried so hard. I’m still trying. I’m grasping grasping grasping at no reward.

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The rain is coming down like crazy, so I'm trying to hurry, plus Lio looks like he's about to require the use of psychiatric **drugs**. He leans against the car and blows on his hands while I unlock it, his collar hitched up so it protects some of his skin from the cold. It's an old car, so both doors need to be unlocked by hand before we can get in, and Lio's just standing there, nursing a **cigarette** between his fingers, trying to keep it lit, taking short drags on it like they're all he can stand. He's making a lot of glances over each shoulder—Is anyone coming? Who's coming?—but I tell myself he doesn't want to get caught, not that he's worried he's going to get shot, because I really don't know what to think, if all of a sudden Lio's afraid of getting shot. I don't know what that means about anything. Anyway, he's not freaking out or anything, he's just a little twitchy. "Ready?" I ask him.

ODY WANTS TO SHOW ME EVERYTHING HE'S MADE since he's been here, and it's more than I can believe, canvas after sculpture after canvas. Some of the **pills** he's taking must have switched on some artistic thing in his brain. I know I'm bitter and angry and this is probably a horrible thing to think, but it totally feels like every time someone goes to any kind of rehabilitative place, whether it's for **drugs** or **abuse** or attitude or whatever their problem is, they all come out artists. Every- one's a **fucking** artist now.

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Todd is already at work, and Craig's parents are sleeping. Across town, my family is asleep, except my mother in New York, who is **drinking** or sleeping, and my grown-up sisters, who are probably just **drinking**. I think when we sleep, the world belongs to everyone still awake. Which means a whole **shitload** of the world belongs to Craig. I whisper his name from the top of the stairs. He rolls over in his bed and looks at me. He isn't emailing. He's lying there. "Come upstairs," I tell him. He moans a little. **"God, my parents . . ."** "Like this is about your parents." I know what that room is to him. "Come on. I'm sick of looking at all your stupid trophies and drawings all by myself. Come tell me what they mean."

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He used to be a cancer kid—bald, skinny, mouth sores, leukemia. That was when he was five until he was seven, I think. He got to go to Alaska to see polar bears because of the Make-A-Wish Foundation. He said one time that the thing about cancer kids is no one knows what to do with them if they don't die. He's fine now, but he shouldn't be **smoking cigarettes**. He had a twin brother who died.

I say, "I don't think you're going to get cancer. I really don't think so. I mean, **smoking** doesn't help, probably, but you're not going to get cancer." He shrugs again. "If you had been around when I was five, you wouldn't have thought I was going to get cancer then, either. I was just a kid." And even though I don't think I could have figured out, now, that he's scared, I still think I could have looked at kid-Lio, even if I was five years old myself, and known that he would be one of the kids who gets cancer. I can't get it out of my head that he would have had that old-photograph-cancer-kid glow.

PROFANITY APPROXIMATE COUNT (and other sensitive words)

Bitch - 6	Asshole – 5
Fuck - 48	SmartAss – 1
God – 70	Hardass - 3
Jesus - 9	Hell – 5
Shit – 100	Penis – 5
Damn – 2	Vagina – 1
BadAss – 2	Pussy - 1
Jackass – 2	

RED FLAG

Assassinated – 1	Smoking – 2
Drunk – 7	Violence – 4
Drinking – 2	Sex – 16
Drugs – 2	

CONCLUSION

Not appropriate literary content for K-12 schools

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