

Wilderness House Literary Review 15/4

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Stand Up Taller

I would have given anything to trade places with her. To take her pain away. I would have sold my soul to the devil twice and ran through fire to have her safe and sound. But there was nothing I could do. Absolutely nothing. I had to be content to sit by and watch as her bones turned to dust from the poison drip in her arm.

She told me over the phone. We never called each other. Face time, maybe, but call? Out of the question. Something was wrong. Given that I was grounded from my phone, I hid in the downstairs bathroom, as far away from my mother as I could get and swiped to answer.

"Hey, Lil. Are you okay?" I asked in a low whisper over the TV roaring upstairs, "What's going on?"

"Yeah, uh, I'm okay, I guess." Lil mumbled, "Remember when I said I had something to tell you at practice?" We were currently in a production of Sally Cotter at a local theatre. I hated every moment of it, but Lil, with her abounding charm and featured role coveted the nightly rehearsals. She floated between groups of friends and my sulking self with ease and organized theatre fundraisers I refused to set foot near.

"Oh, so you're finally gonna tell me?" My tone was sarcastic and dry.

There was a long pause as she searched for the right words, "Look, Teagan, I have cancer."

My mouth went dry. My knees buckled beneath me. The bathroom tiles were cold on my face as I lay, curled into a ball, holding the phone away from my face so she wouldn't hear me crying.

I was ultimately forgiven for using my phone when grounded, considering the news I delivered to my mother that night. I begged her for a ride to the hospital despite the late hour. The drive there was quiet, the only sound was the whispering of the tires over the freeway, soft and feather light. Bright stars danced above, and when the moon glared against my tear stained hands, I swear it shone so bright it burned holes into my retinas.

All the people I loved most in the world were already there, gathered around her bed. Lil was our glue, the socialite butterfly of our massive prepubescent army. She sat there, garbed in hospital gowns that couldn't have suited her less and laughed as my friends cracked dirty jokes. Such a late night hang out with the whole gang would have been amazing under any other circumstances, but small details reminded us of why we were here. Abby sat sobbing in a corner, unable hold her emotions in. A constant beeping came from the pole Lil dragged behind her. The whole room smelled off, like cleaning products gone bad. It was a fantasy encased in a nightmare.

Mostly life was fine. The couches in the hospital were comfortable, especially considering how much time I spent sprawled out them, legs and arms tangled with various other preteens. I rode the bus to the hospital almost every day when the clock finally had enough decency to end the

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torture known as summer school. It was a one exchange bus ride, meaning I switched buses once at the downtown plaza. The bus I switched to, Bus #2, was the designated hospital route bus, and I was always the youngest person aboard. Old women in wheelchairs gave me sidelong looks either pitying me or judging my short shorts, I never knew which.

I tried to help fill Lil's role in the theatre, facetimeing her at performances and trying to have a better attitude. Still, I celebrated when the last show had come and gone. I was a free man! At least until school started.

Freshman year was the worst of my entire life. I went from a tiny magnet middle school to a tiny magnet high school, so you would think the transition would be easy. I was supposed to start high school with my three best friends, Cash, Abby and of course, Lil. We had all pushed each other to apply, helped to edit our application essays; we even went over Cash's head and texted his mom in the hopes we could all start together in the fall. Cancer tore that plan to shreds. We wouldn't be joining at the same time like we always planned. All our handwork was for nothing. To make matters worse for me, classes were sorted by math level, meaning I had no classes with Abby or Cash. I was completely alone in this new environment, like a baby left to drown in a roaring ocean, circled by hungry sharks on all sides.

Still, I thought to myself, she can join us midyear. My hopes of Lil joining us midyear quickly turned to hopes she would join at the start of sophomore year as it became abundantly clear that she would be devastatingly behind in class. Smart as she was, nobody could jump into the middle of AP engineering or biomed, and not be completely lost. Heck, I was lost, and I had been in the class all year long! She would join us next year. I could hold out for her. I had to. That singular thought was my overarching thread of hope. It was fine nobody in my class liked me, because Lil would be there soon. It was fine I had panic attacks over tests, something I had never experienced before, because Lil would be there soon. It was fine I tortured the Spanish teacher, because Lil would be there soon and who better was there smooth over my blatant disrespect?

This time, she told me over text. DM, to be more accurate.

"You'll love it here," I typed, "It's just like middle school but a little bit harder." This was an outright lie, and we both knew it. High school was nothing like our grade-free, test-free middle school, and Lil had heard enough of my late-night rants to know that.

She took forever to respond. "I'm not going to SVT. I just can't. I'm not smart enough. I'll probably just go to CV or something."

Once again, I found myself on the ground, sobbing silently. I threw my phone against the wall with all the force I could muster. It didn't even have the curtesy to break, and it bounced harmlessly onto the carpeted floor. How could she do this? Didn't she care? Didn't she know I was only holding out for her? My whole body shook with tremors like an earthquake had been started inside of my stomach. I gasped for air. And at that moment I gave up. I gave up on our friendship. She obviously didn't care about me as much as I cared about her. I gave up on making new friends. I gave up on my schoolwork. I gave up on hope.

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We didn't speak again for two years. The habits I had fallen into from lack of hope were self-destructive. In short, I had turned myself into a complete and utter brat. People avoided me, and whispered behind my back, I ate alone in the crowded cafeteria and never participated in class. Every comment that escaped my lips was foreign and cruel. I was an empty brained zombie, a shell of my former self. Alive, but not quite there.

Something had to change; I forced myself to be better, to try again. Each and every day I worked to be a good person again. In those long two years, I completely rebuilt myself as a person. I switched schools, there was no reason to stay in that pit of misery anymore. I finally made friends. I found a whole new side of myself, a personality combining who I wanted to be and the zombie I was, that I would never have found if I hadn't been to rock bottom. I found myself. It took two years for me to reach out again, which I did in a hyperactive, late night, caffeine addled delirium. We instantly reconnected. She had none of the hard feelings I imagined she would for my abandonment in the hardest period of her life, and she wasn't even aware of how much she had hurt me. We bonded over our past and nostalgia, once again becoming friends who text on an almost daily basis. Sometimes, you have to fall down and wallow in the mud to stand up taller than ever before.