**Burger Run**

Morgan sat hunched over his computer, small beads of sweat slowly clustering themselves in the premature creases deepening on his forehead. He couldn’t remember the password. **DYL@N**,he typed over and over, different combinations of numbers and letters following the name he rarely spoke out loud with each try. Without taking his eyes off the screen, Morgan blindly reached to slide a sheet of paper off of the neat stack next to him. He began scribbling down the sequences that ran through his head over and over throughout the day. The familiar patterns quickly appearing on the page as the characters flowed like clockwork from the tip of his brainpan to the nib of his pen. Soon, the paper is full. Gently, he lifted the edge of the thin sheet, and felt the delicate ripple from the slight bend produced from flipping it, smoothly, and in one slow, deliberate motion. Morgan took a slight pause – just long enough to take in a breath, and to close his eyes. By the time his eyes fully opened and the breath was releasing he had brought the pen back down on the newly blank paper to continue his scribblings.

I could see all of this perfectly from the doorway of his study. I often stood here to watch the turmoil he experienced at having forgotten something – something of great importance to him but of little value to most others. The password to his laptop being one he forgot regularly. I wondered if he knew I was there, if he could feel my presence with the acuity that I felt his.

Again, his page was full and he leaned back in his big leather chair, worn and sunken with age and use, a signal to me that his sequences had run themselves dry for the time being – their mystic power to keep him calm and occupied for hours have been exhausted. It’s my turn.

“Morgan,” I tried softly, waiting for some indication that he had heard me, “Honey, it’s me. Are you hungry? Maybe some tea? Water?”

As I said this it occurred to me that the chances he had eaten since the last time I was here were slim. There were no dirty dishes for me to clean in the kitchen when I arrived. Most days, Morgan sat alone in the study – a single desk lamp glowing orange in the dusty darkness of the windowless room, illuminating only the three feet of space he occupied and the dust mites that constantly hung in the air. I hate this room.

“Is Dylan here?” he asked, turning just slightly towards me, one eye stayed fixed on the computer screen, his face unmoving, blank, as the numbers drained themselves from his mind, “he’s coming today, right?”

Hearing Morgan say that name always pulls my stomach slightly downwards, pulling my lungs and throat along with it, constricting my airways and making it difficult for me to both breathe and speak, especially to him. There is nothing I hate more than telling my brother his childhood friend is dead.

“Of course he is sweetie he’s just…running a bit late,” I tried not to avert my eyes, to alert him to my lie “How about a burger and shake, to pass the time? I’m buying.” I made a concerted effort to look right at him, smile just enough, and pop my hip to the side to lighten the mood that only I could feel.

“I dunno, Gwyn.” He shook his head but had swiveled that old musty chair more in my direction, his demeanor melting into that I recognized as my brother from earlier, happier years – I smiled a little more. “A burger sounds great but I’ve got a lot of work to do.” He gestured behind him to the immaculate stack of blank papers next to the one his pen has ravaged with numbers and letters, confident in his delusion.

“You know what? I’ll run to 5 Guys and be back in no time.” my smile – it seemed – had grown again, letting him know as much as myself that everything is okay, everything is normal. Everything is happening exactly the way it’s supposed to, exactly the way it always does. 5 Guys was his favourite.

I am five years Morgan’s elder, effectively making him my baby brother and charge. As kids, I harboured a burning jealousy towards him – he had friends and relationships that I did not as a child and teenager.

“Gwyn, you’re a doll,” the grin that spread across his face was so genuine that I couldn’t help but smile back and give him a little wink before turning on my heel to leave. “Wait! Maybe get something for Dylan too? He loves 5 Guys,” I reversed my swivel as he said this to resume my position in the doorway, feet planted as firmly as possible in the thick old carpet that reeked of generations old cigarette smoke and moisture. The dankness of the room pressed in on me as I attempted to maintain my faltering smile.

It’s moments like these, watching Morgan desperately holding on to Dylan, that the jealousy returns. It took years of painstaking effort for me to have the kinds of friendships Morgan seemed to just naturally attract. No matter how much he internally struggled with the numbers and the counting, out of the two of us, he was always the one with plans – the one with places to be while I was at home with my textbooks. Even now he gets to live in a world where he has a best friend, even if it’s built on delusion. I on the other hand don’t have that luxury.

As a child, Morgan had this big dopey smile. The kind often associated with puppies overwhelmed by the joy of play. It was with that smile innocently plastered on his face that I remembered how far my brother has fallen since we lost Dylan. They had always been a strange pair; counting everything they came into contact with, recording their observations of the world. Small things, insignificant things – things no one else noticed or cared to notice. I remember one afternoon they spent four hours recording the number of thorns growing on the single prized rose bush in the backyard. They had decided that the only way to count them properly was to pull them out, effectively de-thorning the entire bush and pissing off our mother more than anyone thought possible.

This memory is one that returns to me often. I even told it at Dylan’s funeral in Morgan’s stead. The two of them had been in a car accident, and Morgan had remained in the hospital for nearly two months. By the time he was released, his mind was firmly planted in a reality where the accident had never occurred and Dylan had not died. My mother likes to tell me that if he had attended the funeral, the delusion would not exist. I think she’s wrong.

“Gwynny, is something wrong?”

“Morgan, please don’t call me Gwynny. You’re not 10 years old anymore,” Morgan’s use of my childhood nickname had placed a hot clutch in my chest, snapping me out of the memories that had filled my head. The picture of the triumphantly smiling boys holding out a big flat Tupperware full of what must have been hundreds of thorns instead of cookies had already started to fade. The image of my minimally functioning twenty-one year old brother was coming back into focus. The boyhood grin had dimmed and the creases in his forehead had once again grown visible.

I started to internally panic – afraid that I had sabotaged a rare moment when the man in the big, dark, dusty room was my brother, and not some shell whose well being I had donned responsibility for since the only other person who understood him was forcibly removed from his life. It is because of moments like this that my carefully constructed adult life had been reduced to the solitude of my youth. Morgan just can’t be on his own. He can’t do it. My mother called these moments delusions, brought on by the release of chemicals from overindulging his now debilitating OCD for hours at a time. It was because of moments like this that she refused to see him, refused to believe that the boy she raised was the same grown man who stared up at me like a child. To me, these moments were precious, no matter how painful they might be. To tell Morgan that the reality he thought he was in and that the truths he desperately wanted were all delusions was to destroy him, over, and over and over again – as recurrently as the persistently churning sequences in his head.

No one but Morgan knows what truly happened, and the Morgan that was in the accident is not the same Morgan who spends 24 hours a day in this tiny dust filled room. From what the doctors and police gathered while he was in the hospital the two of them had been on some sort of pattern driven joy ride – turning right at one turn and left at the next and so on. At some point, they must have turned into oncoming traffic. Morgan was driving.

While I wasted time panicking Morgan had begun to turn his chair back around toward the desk, I could see him itching to slide off another sheet of his paper, to pick up the lone black pen sitting perfectly aligned to both the stack of paper, and the open laptop. His eyes were slowly shifting from my face and back to the paper. He had not yet responded to my outburst.

“Ugh. Sorry. Ignore me,” I rolled my eyes, and forced my lips to form the biggest smile I could manage, “I’m hungry as fuck, that’s all. How about that burger?”

“For Dylan too?” he asked cautiously after a pause, perhaps testing both of our convictions in his delusion and my lie.

Over the past several minutes the return of my childhood jealousy has turned to guilt, as it always does. My brother has lost everything, and all I can think about is wanting to go out with my friends. All I should want is to be here with him. He needs me – how could I be so selfish.

“Of course honey. For Dylan too,” I like to tell myself that if it weren’t for the fleetingness of the delusions I would never lie – would never take the cowards way out as I have learned to do over the last few months. But these moments were short lived, “I’ll be back in thirty minutes. Tops. Try to get some of your work done while I’m gone, eh? Then when I’m back you can take a break and come down to the kitchen to eat. Like when we were kids,” he nods but his smile is gone. Mine tightens.

This time, my swivel was slow. Slow enough that at the halfway point I turned my head back in Morgan’s direction just enough to watch him slide a fresh sheet to rest squarely in front of him. As I quietly closed the door behind me, I leaned back and closed my eyes – exhaling the breath I hadn’t known I was holding and tried to and shake off some of the guilt and tension that had built up since talking to Morgan. It has been seven months since the accident and four since Morgan was discharged from the hospital – and I haven’t had more than a few hours to spend on myself since, let alone go on a date or spend time with friends. By the time I get back from the burger run, the brother I know and love will have retreated so far back into the depths of his mind that only a ghost will remain to scribble his sequences furiously over and over, forever waiting for Dylan to return.

(1997 words)