Casualties

You see them. You see them every day. I plaster them across magazine covers, I whisper their names into news anchor’s ears. You see them, and you think you know them, and for a few days you join in the chorus, a tearful dissonance of “Bullying. Cutting. Eating Disorders. Depression. Suicide.” You see them, and you think you know them. But you don’t. Nobody does. They don’t even know themselves. But I do.

It’s Friday night. Fridays are usually busy for me, I don’t know why. Maybe it’s the stress of one more week, maybe they can’t bear the thought of another Monday morning, maybe it’s the alcohol that slurs their voice of reason, I don’t know. But it’s Friday, and I get the call.

She’s 16. This is normal. She’s in her room, alone. This is also normal. She’s staring at a computer screen. Normal. But I close my eyes and wait. Her voice slips somewhere inside me, timid at first, and I hear it.

“I hate myself. I hate myself. I hate myself.”

Her thoughts color my mind like bruises, watercolor splotches that poison slowly, because these things take time. I don’t get invited here on a whim, the invitation is slow in coming, written letter by letter and sent on tearstained paper.

I always accept.
The party takes a while to get started, so I look around the room. On a purple bookshelf left over from the days of princess dresses and playdates, I find pictures. Neon scraps of fabric cover barely-there bodies, sand and water throw promises of perfect tans back at the camera. Teeth like new white crayons, hands rest on jutting hips like the tired birds they are. As I look at the frozen memory, her thoughts interject what I already know.

“I'm fat. Oh my gosh I'm fat I'm fat I'm fat.”

These girls count ribs like Christmas presents, jealous toddlers each wanting more than their sisters. They give up ice cream for gym memberships, are introduced to their new best friends Ana and Mia in dimly lit school bathrooms. These girls trade curves for hollows to stash their secrets in, adorn themselves with new collar bone necklaces to attend nighttime purging galas. They never strive to be more than they are, always less.

Always less.

Sometimes it’s hard to hear their silent weeping, but it’s quiet here. My hands find the doorframe, feeling the cracks and chips from being slammed. Ghosts dance down the empty hallway, arguments and grudges and judgments buried deep in each other’s chests. Posed family pictures hide the claws dug into each arm. Smile, smile, smile.

“I'm not enough. I'll never be enough for them.”

Notches along the wrists match notches along the wall, some measure growth and some measure frustration. Resentment crushed her spirit as her body stretched taller, almost desperate to outgrow this place. C-minuses and nights out too late and empty gas tanks carve reminders of “This isn’t how we raised you” and “We expect better” into her skin, answers screaming
“This is as good as it gets.”

The first few bars of a tinny pop song pulls us out of our reverie. She reaches for her phone, the harsh blue light spreading over her tired makeup. A few carefully sharpened words, thrown without thought by an online somebody. Knives that drag unwilling tears from her eyes.

“They hate me. Why do they hate me?”

I’ve learned that shattered hearts are often weaponized. Broken people throw broken shards at each other. In the haze of insults and whispered “I don’t cares,” each newly wounded heart sends shrapnel into bystanders. Innocents. And the war grows.

I don’t know who started this, a constant battle against an entire generation, a civil war headed by scared rebels with too many causes. This is a war. And there will be casualties.

This is where I come in.

I am the poison they think is the antidote, the razor blade inside the apple. I am a perfect escape. I am the quiet “I could never” in the back of the mind, the door that isn’t seen until the lights go out, the fire escape. I can wait. Oh, I am so good at waiting.

The stalemate inside them is a spark that is either put out or fanned, a fire that consumes them. I am the gas, the fan, the fuel, the gunshot that sends them into battle. My victim sits assessing her injuries, an insult from two weeks back, another dateless school dance, a disapproving glance at breakfast this morning. Today I find myself desperate to be sent home, to let this girl be a veteran and not a victim. But the choice is not mine.

She puts down the phone

Stares at it for a moment.
She makes her way towards the closet, her hands find a scarf that her old best friend
gave to her last year on her birthday.

No, I want to tell her, no no no no. Not this time. Not you. Because she can’t see
it, but I can. I’m tall enough to see across the battlefield. I can see behind her, tiny hands
being held, smiles shot her way when she wasn’t looking, desperate prayers murmured at the
kitchen table with eyes locked on the clock. I can see ahead, spring breaks and new favorite
T.V. shows and coffee-flavored mornings. She doesn’t know that someone she hasn’t met is
wondering what it would be like to know someone like her.

She makes the knot.

She doesn’t feel the wounds, not yet. But they will. She can’t hear her brother’s sobs
and she won’t see her father stop feeling again and she won’t watch the girls at school walk
around with eyes even more haunted than before. She can’t. She won’t. But they will.

I will.

“This is as good as it gets.”

She doesn’t know that these girls, these boys, these soldiers, will follow her into battle.

Nobody wins.

I win.

These soldiers, drafted into a war they cannot even name, greet me differently. There
is no flooding of peace in the eyes like with the old ones. I think that’s what they’re looking
for: Peace. Because this is their white flag, too many pills or too many cuts or just a single
bullet.

A blue scarf.
There isn’t a flash of recognition either. These children don’t even know that this is their surrender because they see me as their relief, a flight off the front lines. Not the enemy.

Perhaps it is just now that I realize I am the enemy, the most unwilling of pied pipers, leading children into battle with promises of rest, and maybe glory. Rest is not what I give, glory is not what I bring. I am a landmine, setting off a million other painful explosions in the hearts of those nearby. But as her eyes squarely meet mine, I know she doesn’t see. She can’t.

“I hate myself, I’m fat, I’ll never be enough. Why do they hate me I hate myself, this is as good as it gets.”

She steps off her stool and falls gracefully onto the first landmine.

My work here is done. I should leave, but the explosion still ricochets around my head, empty where her desperate thoughts once rented space. These battles have been fought and fought and lost in a million different venues, but they all stay with me. Winter days and rushing rivers and concrete bridges smelling of cigarettes, graffiti scarring the town.

Quiet woods and pine trees and nobody to hear the gunshot, cars on forgotten roads with fast food wrappers still in the front seat.

And now, a new one. A smallish room painted the color of the sky after the storm clouds clear out. Memories of perfume and mascara on the mirror. Folded handwritten notes from those girls that she convinced herself didn’t care. Stuffed animals staring from the bed, sewn on smiles that will hide what they have seen.

A blue scarf.

I can feel the distant sounds of other battles calling me, a river of grief and blame and anger rushing through her family and their families for the next forever. A river that will
wash her and all the other fallen soldiers to the Tomb of the Unknown, or maybe just the tomb of the Unwanted, and their names and their pain and their struggle will be forgotten and the war will rage on.

I leave what’s left of her behind, the quietest of carnage, and hope that maybe this casualty might be enough to convince an entire army to lay down their arms against themselves.