



I hunch over my knees in the middle of the room, hugging them as tightly as my arms will clamp. I rock back and forth, praying this nightmare will end. The cold floor sends shivers racing through my body, competing with the heavy thumps of my heart against my chest.

My eyes search the unfamiliar surroundings as I fight the urge to throw up.

Where am I?

The alarm resounds in the small room, but I don't dare touch it. Instead, I will it to stop. I will myself to wake. To remember everything.

No. Anything.

Why can't I remember?

A headache lingers at the rim of my consciousness. My fingers find my temples, massaging in rapid circles as I pinch my eyes shut.

I force myself to suck in a slow breath, tears tumbling

down my cheeks.

What's wrong with me?

My fingers dig into my temples, reminding me this is no dream. This, whatever it is, is real.

I press my face into the flannel pajama pants I wear, stifling the sob.

A sound echoes behind me in the hall outside the room, causing me to flip around so fast my head spins. Light floods from under a door, and a shadow passes through. Instinct tells me to take flight, but the terror in my body won't allow my limbs to move. My chest collapses as if a four-hundred ton weight has been set upon it.

I can't breathe.

Desperate to inflate my lungs, I push myself to all fours and concentrate on the cold floor, tracing the patterns of the wood with my eyes.

Where. Am. I?

A breath catches in my throat.

I can't remember my name.

The alarm grows louder, and the constant beeping is grating on every nerve in my body. I yank the cord from the wall, finally thrusting the room into silence. The clock tumbles to the ground, narrowly missing my head, and a sticky note flutters into my vision.

One word is written on it.

Amnesia

Pain sears every cell in my body.

Panic attack.

I grasp at the bed, heaving myself up to sit on the edge. I fold myself in half, tucking my head between my knees, coaxing my mind to calm. I don't know how I realize this is the right thing to do, but it helps. The pain eases, and the haze in my vision lifts. I allow myself only another moment before I push off the bed.

I stand motionless in front of the mirror, numb from the words on sticky notes plastered to every available space within arm's reach. It's like I've done this before and knew I'd do it again. One of the yellow ones shakes me to the core, and I want to release the scream building in my chest.

*This is how your day
begins every morning.*

*The sooner you accept it
the better you'll be.*

Anger sizzles in my chest, and I resist the urge to rip the words from the wall along with every other note that papers the small space. I want to tear them to pieces, but the desire to read them is even stronger.

Notes on the mirror remind me who I am, why I'm here, and who this person is staring back at me, the red hair flowing in wisps over my shoulder with a chunky blonde streak in the front. And those piercing blue eyes.

Have I always had blue eyes?

I feel like I've just woken from a nightmare I can't shake no matter how hard I pinch myself.

More sticky notes on the wall say I live a normal life, despite the amnesia hang-up. I'm seventeen, a junior at Clement High School. My best friend's name is Sam, short for Samantha. My name is Braidan.

"Braidan." The name rolls off my tongue, but it feels wrong. All wrong.

Determination to find answers builds in my chest and beats stronger than the heart beneath my pink nightshirt. A familiar anger rolls over my body, one I've certainly felt before.

How could I know this? I can't even remember my name.

Braidan, I remind myself. Braidan.

Deep down, I know I'm not Braidan. At least, I don't think I'm the Braidan standing in front of the mirror.

"Braidan," a voice calls from behind the door, startling

me. "It's your mom."

My mom?

"Braidan, read the green note on the mirror."

I scan the notes and find a tattered green one attached to the edge. It's written in the same awkward pen as the other twelve-hundred.



Mom's name: Sheila

Appears: 7:30am

Let her in.

"Uh, hold on." My eyes roam over the paper, evaluating its hue.

How do I know this is green and that is a mirror, but I have to be reminded who my mother is?

"Bray, Honey, it'll be okay." Her strained voice travels through the thick panels.

My muscles tense until I can barely make them obey as I twist the handle and step back. I don't know who will emerge, only that the note says it will be my mom. I'm ready for anything, fear etching away at my sanity.

The door opens slowly, and the woman pokes her head through the crack. At the sight of her face, all feelings of alarm melt away. I don't recognize her, but she doesn't appear threatening. A large clip pulls back her medium-length, strawberry-blonde hair, wisps framing her delicate features. Her sorrowful hazel eyes search mine before she swings the door open the rest of the way.

"Are you doing okay? Have you read all your notes yet this morning?"

"I do this every morning?" I manage to squeak out as I blink back the welling tears.

"Yes, but you do fine," she says, heading for the attached bathroom. "You need to get in the shower before Sam comes for you." The hiss of water echoes off the walls in the small room. "You have some more notes in here and in the shower. They usually make you feel better about your day." She places fresh, sage-green towels upon the marble counter, then stands in the doorway, watching me with guarded eyes. She allows a long, frustrated sigh to tumble from her mouth, then heads for the door, giving my arm a gentle pat as she passes.

"What happened? Why don't I remember anything?" I try to suck in the breath before the waves of horror break through my words.

Sheila twists on her heels, wringing her hands in nervous circles, like she's massaging lotion into her dry skin. "They aren't sure. You started with the notes when you realized you were losing your memory. Some days are better than others. Today looks like a good one."

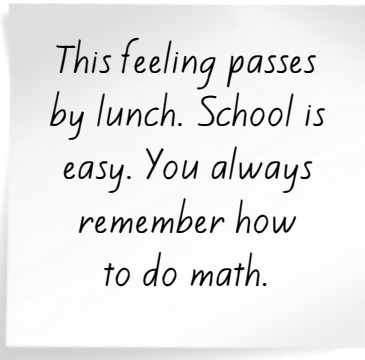
I stare at nothing, the panic in my chest screaming for escape. If this is a good day, what will a bad one look like?

The walls of my world tumble inward around me, crashing at my feet.

I turn to the bathroom, away from her scrutinizing eyes. Tears slip down my cheeks, and I close the door behind me without another word.

The steam in the bathroom masks the mirror as I undress, which is good, since I don't think I can handle looking at the stranger reflecting back.

Notes fill the bathroom like wallpaper, and I look for another shred of assurance that what I'm going through is normal.



*This feeling passes
by lunch. School is
easy. You always
remember how
to do math.*

How is that possible? How come I can't remember my name or even my face? I yank open the shower door, only to find laminated notes papering the inside. The nagging in my stomach says this should all feel very familiar, but my heart bursts into tiny pieces as I step in.

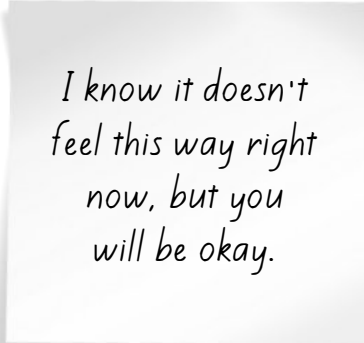
Closing my eyes, I lean against the wall under the steady stream of water, praying that I will wake. That this is a dream.

That everything will be as it once was, however it had been.
That this is not my life.

This is not my life. This is not my...

Silent sobs break from my clenched jaw, and I allow myself to drift down the wall to the floor. I hug my knees and rock back and forth, not knowing how long I'll be allowed to hide from the world awaiting me on the other side of the door.

When I convince my eyes to part, the note sticking to the bottom of the wall makes a trickle of hope flutter in my chest.



*I know it doesn't
feel this way right
now, but you
will be okay.*

I stare at the sticky note, reading it over and over again. I know it means I've been here before and will surely be here again.



*Search
for
answers.*

I bite back the painful realization that even if I find any answers, I will forget them the next time I wake. Then I'll sit here and do this all over again.

What type of answer should I look for? Answers to my illness, if that's what it is? Surely, medical teams are working on my memory crisis, right? Or maybe it isn't a crisis. Maybe it's a blessing. Maybe God's sparing me from the awful knowledge of my past.

Out of the shower, I head to the walk-in closet. My clothes are lined in perfect color order, mostly t-shirts and jeans. I grab the first white top my hand finds and examine the front, looking for some recollection. *Switchfoot* is written across the top, with colorful balloons falling from the base of the letters. I wait for some preference to strike me, but it doesn't, so I just pull the shirt on over my tank top. I grab a pair of blue jeans from the tall stack and slip them over my hips. I gaze at the procession of rubber soles and grab the first pair, skipping the socks.

I read every note I come across. I need to feel normal by the time my friend Sam comes to get me.

Normal.

What is normal? This *is* normal, says my mom.

I pinch my eyes shut and shake my head. No. This can't be normal. It can't.

The clues around the mirror tell me about my personality.

*Your nickname
is Bray.*

*Don't let anyone call
you Ray. Especially
not the jerk,
Lucas Tress.*

I say the name Lucas Tress in my head, hoping I'll remember it, since it seems to be important.

A long string of yellow notes line the left wall, listing my supposed likes and dislikes. I glance over them, but nothing sticks out as important.

A small picture book draws what remains of my attention. My fingers outline letters engraved in the brown leather.

"Made with love by Sam." The words sound somehow empty. I will myself to open the book. My hand grasps the edge, and before I can chicken out, the pages flutter open.

Every available space holds pictures of Sam and me on

adventures I can't remember -- running, dancing, making goofy faces, watching movies, and posing for each other with a fast food clown. In every one, both of us grin as if we're truly best friends.

Guilt tugs at my mind. I want to smile at these happy memories, but they're someone else's memories, not mine. How could I forget these things?

My eyes wander to the mirror and stare at perfect red wisps framing the pale skin of my face and the blonde chunk covering half my brow. I see the same girl as in the pictures, no one can deny that. The same blue eyes peer back at me. The same dimpled cheek when I force a smile. The same white teeth.

I set the book down and pull in a deep breath.

How can any of this be okay? Even though my thoughts ravage anything positive, I need to accept that it is. I don't want to spend my day in misery, even though I won't remember it tomorrow.

Another note is stuck to the bottom of the picture frame on my nightstand. My face is here, along with Sheila's and three others. A man with dark hair graying at his temples has his arm around Sheila. The note indicates he's my father, James. With a gentle but firm gaze, he stares through the glass as though trying to hold the family to a high standard. His nose curves at the tip and reminds me of my reflection.

The two boys in the photo are my brothers, ages fourteen and eight. The oldest, Drew, has dark hair and eyes. He crosses his arms in a rebellious, displeased gesture. Tanner,

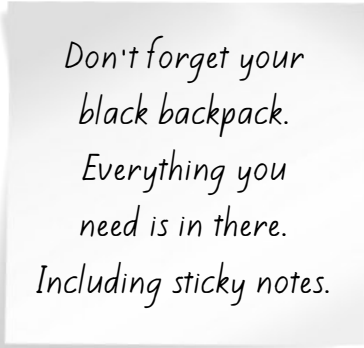
on the other hand, sits on my lap, and his eyes twinkle from inside the pixels of ink. His tousled, blond hair sticks out in every direction at the top of his head, as if someone forgot to tell him to comb it that morning. The note says my nickname for him is Squirt. Seems appropriate.

I gaze at my now familiar face. I'm smiling, and while it doesn't appear authentic, I can't say it looks completely fake either. My eyes are dull and lifeless, as if I realize the photo is being taken solely to remind me who my family is.

"Bray, you're running late!" Sheila's muffled voice echoes down the hall outside my room.

I stare at the picture of my family, trying to burn their faces into my retinas.

The note near the light switch is purple.



*Don't forget your
black backpack.
Everything you
need is in there.
Including sticky notes.*

I peek into the bag and suppress a laugh. Sticky notes of every color line the bottom, nestled up against a collection of pens and a math book.

My hand rests on the knob for a good minute before I

convince myself to twist it and head toward the voices. Voices I don't recognize. Voices of my family.

I put one foot in front of the other down the narrow hall, rattling the names off in my head. Mom is Sheila. Dad is James. My brothers are Drew and Tanner -- Squirt.

They're sitting in the large eat-in kitchen when I enter, but no one looks up. Sheila stands at the stove, busying herself with a pot of something steaming. Smells like oatmeal, but how do I know that?

"Bray?" James says, startling me. "Are you going to have breakfast?"

Sheila doesn't turn to acknowledge me, but the boys look up briefly from their bowls before they refocus on their breakfast.

"Sure." I clutch the strap of my backpack, hoping it will steel my nerves.

"The oatmeal is ready." Sheila pulls the food from the stove. "Boys, you're going to miss the bus. Hurry up." She nudges Drew, who's not moving. "I'm not taking you if you miss it again."

Drew groans but hops up from the table just as I sit. I watch as Tanner heads for the door, shoulders slumped, defeated in some unseen battle. His eyes connect with mine, and before he can turn away, I see sadness waiting there. Is it for me? Or for him because I don't remember who he is? "Hey, Tanner?" I call, unsure what has made me speak up.

He flips around, and his eyes sparkle as in the

photograph, lit with anticipation.

"Have a good day, Squirt."

I don't even realize he's moving until his arms are around my neck.

Everyone stares, frozen in shock.

"I love you, Bray," he whispers so quietly I can barely hear him.

"I love you too, Squirt," I whisper back.

"Please remember," he says, then lets me go and runs from the house, the screen door slamming behind him.

Drew's mouth hangs open in disbelief, and his eyes pinch together with something more than annoyance.

Sheila and James stare after the boy who's obviously gone outside the normal confines of our daily routine. Or is it me who's done something new? I remind myself I'd nicknamed him Squirt. Surely this isn't the first time I've called him that?

"Drew, go," Sheila says, bumping his arm again.

He watches for another moment before grabbing his backpack, with much more force than necessary, and heading for the door.

Great. So one brother hates me and the other wants me to remember. But what am I supposed to remember? Him? My life? I flop into the chair and stare into my bowl, wondering if oatmeal is even on my list of likes.

"Did I do something wrong?" I don't look up for a response, but I can hear Sheila's deep, sorrowful sigh.

"No, Honey, it's just..."

James clears his throat, which draws my head up. My parents are locked in a silent stare for what seems like hours before a knock at the door brings life back to the room.

"That's Sam," Sheila says, trying to hide her voice from cracking. "She's a little early. Bray, why don't you take a granola bar instead." She hands the green metallic package to me when I stand.

"Have a good day, Kiddo." Dad rises and gives me an awkward embrace. "Try to take everything in stride."

I nod, biting back the knot growing in my stomach. As soon as I open the door, the safe haven of this home will be no more. I'll have to deal with life as it comes. Will I be able to handle this? The expression on my parents' faces says I can. They believe in me. Tanner believes in me. I should believe in me, too.

The world moves in slow motion as I head for the door.

The smiling girl behind the pane melts every bit of anxiety built up in my body. Sam stands there, blonde hair up in a ponytail, sunglasses on her head, happy to see me.

"You ready, Bray?" she says, as if she doesn't realize this is the first time I've laid eyes on her.

"As ready as I'll ever be," I reply, then close the door to the safety behind me.

