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# **GONE WITH A TRACE**

*a short story*

by

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## Gone with a Trace

Summer is coming to an end, and as the leaves crunch beneath my feet with every step, I start to feel raindrops on my face. Now, I can't differentiate between the tears running down my cheek and the rain pouring down on me. I don't walk faster, I keep my pace.

Nobody told me that you'll lose all of your will to live after someone important disappears, someone dear to you. After one whole week of crying and denying, and another one filled with anger and confusion, now, I'm just ready for anything to happen to me.

My brother has been missing for 3 weeks, 2 days, and 17 hours. My head has solely been a countdown. Thinking about anything else feels impossible. We've done everything together, with everything I do mean everything. We're twins after all, he was like the other half of my soul, and now, every room in this house seems to have some trace of him left behind.

The weirdest part is how little I've been seeing him the last few months before he disappeared. He was always "out with friends" or visiting dad. Whenever I asked him where he was going, and why he's always so vague about it, he'd laugh it off and tell me not to worry about it.

I've always been mom's favorite, but I don't recognize her anymore. We've always had a good combination of a mother-daughter relationship and being best friends. She often lectured me, but I still loved her, since I know at the end of the day I'm her daughter, even if she sometimes lets me skip school. To be honest, I haven't seen her in weeks. She's been in her room, most likely mourning her not-yet-confirmed-dead son and staying completely silent, it's really scary. Sometimes I'll hear her speaking on the phone late at night through the wall, her voice echoing quietly like a ghost floating through this soulless house. Every time I try to make out who she's talking to, she's already finished and hangs up before I can process anything concise, and returns to being an empty shell of herself. The only time we talked is when we were finished talking to the police in the first week, and I asked her if I could call dad, since my brother, Arthur, was always at this place. My parents share complete custody for the both of us, so maybe Arthur was being his rebellious self, and snuck out while sleeping at his house? She hissed frustratedly: "don't talk about that fucking deadbeat."

For a second, something flashed across her face. It wasn't anger, nor grief, it was something else. The look disappeared so quickly I couldn't tell if I was imagining it.

I really don't want to upset mom. I'm scared to visit dad, I don't want to upset her even more. I know I should talk to him, but...

I finally arrived home. These walks haven't been doing anything for my mental health, yet I still do them. I feel like a corpse being dragged around every time I move.

I return to my room, which was once very maximalist and organized, but is now a colorful, depressing mess. Going to my bed, I probably tripped on 3 plates, 5 books and a hoard of clothes. My room smells like a concoction of every food and drink in the world; overwhelming, unidentifiable, uncomfortable. My outfit is soaking wet, dripping on the endless mess on the floor, of which I've forgotten the look of without all the trash. I need to recharge before I'm able to walk 3 steps to my closet. My head aches as I let myself fall backwards onto my bed, making multiple books, plates and dust particles briefly bounce with me. What do I even wear to sleep? Do I have any clean clothes left?

After rotting in my bed a little more, I go to my closet in search of a clean pajama. I throw all the things I've been stuffing in there to search the bottom drawer; out of sight, out of mind, right? I only find school books, tote bags, hats, and... a videotape?

I'm confused as to how it appeared. Did somebody snoop around in my room? My mom sometimes comes in to clean, or more specifically, she used to. Now, sometimes I hear faint footsteps and my door creaking open at night. I don't blame her or mention it, a mourning mother probably wants to see if her daughter is still safe and breathing. Did she leave it for me?

It's titled "for Blair". It's a little rough around the edges and has some scratches. I haven't seen something like this since I was a baby, but I do know my parents had a video cassette player. I remember watching movies with them, when we used to be a complete family. I'm pretty sure my mom kept it and left it in the living room in a corner somewhere.

The living room is a complete mess. The smell of empty coffee cups, dusty books and unused board games overpower my nose and dry out my eyes a little. The room looks like a before sequence of a house clean-up you'd sometimes see on the internet, just like every other room currently in this house. Nevertheless, it wasn't hard to find it; the VCP was behind some books in a shelf next to the TV. Me and my dad always set it up in order to watch movies together, and I vaguely remember the steps. After fumbling around for a while, I managed to put the tape in and get everything started. I settled myself curiously on the ground between stained cushions on an unwashed old carpet that reeked of wet dog as the tape began to play.

"Mom? Blair? Uhhh... I'm so sorry. I've done something really bad. I'm so stupid. I'm sorry. I'm sorry, mom."

It was my brother Arthur, in the middle of the woods at night. I can tell he's been crying, his face and eyes are so puffy. He has some type of face paint on him, I believe. It looks like some type

of runes. This is the first time I've seen him in a while.

His body started shivering as his voice became quieter and trembly.

“I really hope you got the tape somehow. I wanted to say my last words. As long as you don't continue searching, they won't target you, okay? They know everything. They already know where everyone from our family lives, so please give up. You can't die. Me and dad want to save you, Blair, trust me... this-”

Suddenly, I see 5 mysterious figures in black robes with weird markings on their faces approach him from behind, as Arthur whimpers in fear, one of the figures cuts open his neck while holding him by his hair and lets him drop on the ground. The other man next to him gets the recorder and stops the tape.

The tape clicked off as I stared at the television. Quickly, I scrambled to rewind everything I just saw. I watched it again, and again, and again...

It never changed. The ending never differed. Arthur still looked terrified. The men in black robes were still there, walking up on him from behind, his voice still broke as he spoke everything he could as his time ran out at the hands of these figures. I couldn't believe what I just saw. No matter how many times I rewound it, no amount of denial could change what I just saw. My hands wouldn't stop shaking; my brother is dead.

With a rush of adrenaline and a new wave of grief that washed over me, I grab my old, dusty bike and storm out into the rain. I cycle as fast as I can to my dad's home. I need answers. He knows more about my brother than anyone else, but we never get to hear those things since he started isolating himself from us all months ago. I didn't think about my mom at this moment, I need to know why dad was mentioned. I needed to know what I needed to be saved from.

I ring the doorbell as the rain pours heavily down. No one answers as I hear the chime echoing through the halls. I ring it again. Silence. I start slamming my fist against the door, aggressively letting out everything I've been feeling deep down since becoming numb, until it became red and swollen. Nothing.

I start screaming “Dad!” multiple times until my throat becomes sore, until I completely snap and impulsively grab my bike before smashing the window.

Climbing in, I feel the shards of the remaining glass brush against my jeans and poke into my skin. The house is completely engulfed in darkness and dust. “DAD!” I continue to shout, but I still don't get any response. I walk along the hallways as I get swallowed by the murkiness. My footsteps tread through the seemingly abandoned house to explore each room, using the flashlight

function on my phone; every single room looks eerily empty, yet messy and dirty at the same time, like I'm trapped in a liminal void that used to be familiar, but without my dad, I feel like a little child lost in a huge forest in the night.

The second floor wasn't any better; the oppressive atmosphere suffocated me as the dust was blinding my sight, yet I pushed forward to look in every room. With every breath, the dry, putrid odor of the space was softly burning away my nose hairs.

His bedroom looks like a horror game scene, where you could get jumpscared any second; it's too quiet, and as I explore, I feel the suspense making my breath weak and heavy. I search around for something, honestly anything, but every room has been pretty much the same; filled with suspense but no payout, all his belongings have been emptied. Everything is gone.

As I sit on his bed, I only feel utter frustration and confusion. I need answers, but I can't find any, no matter how desperately I search for them. My dry eyes become moist, as the tears start blurring my vision. I don't know what to do, what to feel, whom to tell or go to. I feel completely alone in this terrifying world.

I stand up again, ready to search the last room; the office. It's very tiny, but it was enough for two twins to play 2000s co-op games on the computer. I don't expect to find anything there; I'm bad with technology, I don't know his password, and I haven't been finding anything anyway.

All the shelves are filled with even more dust, but all the books and ring folders are gone. The shelves tower over me and even though my hopelessness has taken away all my energy, I decided to push the chair to look on top, and I'm glad that idea came into my head, because I found a videotape titled "Andrew Carnell", the mayor of my town.

That's all I found; a single videotape, in a middle-class residence fit for a three-person family. I still don't know why everything was completely emptied, or why my dad mysteriously vanished. I do admit, I haven't been in contact with him at all in 4-5 weeks, only Arthur has. I hoped for more answers, preferably a deep conversation with my dad, but this videotape could be helpful, maybe.

I try to get out of this house as quickly as I can, stumbling through the halls and tripping slightly down the stairs. I see my bike on the wet grass, the back tire is damaged, with a few glass shards jabbing into the worn-out rubber. I grab it and start cycling anyway, as the bumpy road holds my speed back quite a bit. I jump off and on my bike, wishing for it to magically fix itself while I jog, but it seems like time is being slowed down and consumed by my slow cycling and tired running, only wishing to be home right now. My sweaty palms occasionally slide off the handlebar, causing me to stumble a few times, but I push forward.

I start seeing my house after seemingly jogging and cycling for weeks on end, feeling relief washing over me after every meter of my house getting closer.

“Where were you.” My mom is standing in the middle of the entrance as I open the door, dripping wet and breathing tiredly. I can't mention dad, let alone being at his house, even worse, destroying his window and searching every single corner. My mom has a serious grudge against him, I believe, I have definitely noticed that she can't stand me talking about him since the divorce and his continuous isolation. “You know, uhhh...” I stutter, my voice cracking slightly. “I had this really big craving for cookies. I looked in every store, but the options were so bad!” I smile nervously at her, as she furrows her eyebrows. I can see the tiredness in her eyes, filled with regret. I know those regretful, sorrowful eyes from dad, from when they were in the process of finalizing the divorce.

“I'm going back to bed now. Goodnight, sweetie.” Her voice fades quietly upstairs as it turns into a big yawn. I quietly take out the videotape and sneak into the living room, feeling how my wet jeans drag and drip watery paths onto the floor.

The living room remains a mess. I notice a few more empty coffee mugs piling on the table than the day before, the stench of the coffee makes me forget the piercing smell of my dad's dusty home. I pull out the player yet again and set it up, my heart beating faster with every single move. I quiet down the TV volume, the remote emitting dust with every button pressed. I wait patiently for the tape to start. Not knowing what to expect, but wishing for something. I feel my body getting sticky with sweat as the tape starts to roll.

“What the hell?”

6 figures stand in a half circle with blood markings on their faces, their robes seem to be stained with fresh blood too, but it's hard to tell with black fabric. The stones laid carefully on the ground seem to form some kind of weird pattern, like a symbol. It kind of looks similar to one of the markings on the figures' faces. A new person emerges from the left, walking slowly and powerfully, keeping their head low. As the 6 figures in the background start to hold their hands, the person in the middle slowly lifts their head, and my heart skips a few beats, awaiting what they're going to say.

I quickly pause the tape in shock, shaking vigorously.

“D-Dad?”

I scoot closer to the TV, analyzing every wrinkle, every mole, every feature, every angle. It's him. It's definitely him. “That's the stuff he's been doing all those months?” I whisper weakly under

my breath. In disbelief, I continue to watch, filled with emotions I cannot identify that feel like they're aggressively choking me.

“This ritual has been commissioned by Andrew Carnell and approved by The Great Florence, our glorious leader. Mr. Carnell, we wish money and more success upon you, as we bring you a sacrifice and pray for you. May you continue to be among the elites of this small town.”

As another figure brings in a goat whining in pain, I immediately stop the tape and fall onto my back. I really don't want to see an animal getting killed, my brother was already enough, I believe. I try to slowly process everything I just witnessed, but every single detail and frame is flashing through my mind, unorganized and quickly. I feel my ears painfully ringing as the face of my dad flashes in my mind. I start covering my mouth to disguise my hyperventilating, worrying my mom might hear anything.

Wait... Florence?

“Blair, why aren't you sleeping? It's late.” My body hair quickly spikes up. I didn't hear footsteps at all. I'm glad I put away the tape after the goat came into the screen. My fear and nervousness shoot out a quick excuse. “I remembered this video tape player... It's really nostalgic. But I have no idea how to make it work!” I occasionally pause and stutter as my mom looks at me with no expression. Her energy seems scary and distant now, as she stares deep into my soul. “You should really go to sleep,” she says in a very monotone voice. Her voice is so robotic and quiet, it almost seems like she's threatening me passive-aggressively.

“I'm sorry,” I respond, in an equally quiet voice, just with a sad undertone to it as I stare at the messy ground. Before I can look at her again, she's already gone.

After getting ready for bed, still shaken, I lie on my bed as everything I saw is still flashing before my eyes like a seizure-inducing, sped-up slideshow.

I'm filled with excitement, but the negative type. It's starting to seem like I'm piecing together this fucked up story, but it's not fun. People I love are victims and also turning out to be involved. As I close my eyes, I think about my mother, Florence, possibly being mentioned.

The next morning, the sunlight shines on my face, while highlighting every single mess and clutter in my room. Dust particles dance in the air, looking like flying gold flakes in the warm light. After a few seconds of being awake, everything comes back to me. The despair and confusion immediately make my heart sting in emotional pain.

I don't know what to do.

Continuing to investigate will definitely make everything worse, since every clue I find hits me in the gut with new feelings that jumble my brain and cause me to have the urge to just vomit everything out and get it all out of my system. But I can't stop thinking about it. Every detail I remember makes me more curious.

I feel addicted. But it's not the type of metaphorical addiction like being obsessed with a person you love, I feel like a heroin addict damaging myself with every use.

An idea pops into my head; my dad's computer.

I walk into Arthur's room, it's the only relatively clean room left. It's even more dust-infested, but all of his belongings and decorations still remain stacked and standing, like they could tell so many stories if they had the ability to talk, like they have seen his last moments before he never returned again. Walking around, I can feel parts of his soul and energy scattered around, like a ghost in the shape of a big fog surrounding me and whispering into my heart in a language my brain doesn't understand; but my heart does. It's bittersweet. I can feel myself smiling, seeing the basketball in the corner, the PC on his desk with comic books stacked on top of each other, his dark blue blanket he used to roll me in like a burrito, and his lava lamp, that used to mesmerize us both. Arthur was always incredibly forgetful and clumsy, and always had sticky notes and to-do lists ready to solve his problems, so with that, I began to look through the drawers on his desk, and as expected, piles of paper and notes were in there. Skimming through them, I was hoping to either find the password to dad's computer or his. The paper felt rough on my fingertips, some were stained with drinks or sauces even, and most of them were incredibly random. While the smell of old ketchup or sweet artificial caffeine was brushing against the tip of my nose, I had to let out a few chuckles. "Google why South Sudan was founded. Why so new?" "REMEMBER!!! ask mom for money (school project!!!)" "Is it actually legal to leave when the teacher is 15 minutes late?" His curiosity was usually pretty much hidden, so seeing all of these random or naive questions opened my eyes to a new side of him, unfortunately too late, though. It's stupidly funny seeing all of these questions and notes. I wish he would have had more time to answer them all someday if he remembered.

"DAD'S PASSWORD elias1988fk". This tiny note attempted to fly away and drop to the ground as I was flipping through the array of pages. Immediately after putting the neon-yellow note in my pocket, my new mission became clear; go back to dad's home, and search for any clues about him, Arthur and this situation.

As I thought about an optimal day and time to do this, I realized how suspicious dad is. He was literally in that tape partaking in the sacrifice of a goat, and before that, he'd truly been kind of a deadbeat. I felt my face heating up in rage. If my gut feeling is true; was dad involved in the killing

of Arthur? And if he really was a part of the cause, he's not even brave enough to stay here and be there for his family? At least pretend everything is fine before someone catches him? He's seriously just going to run away and leave me to do all of this alone? The more I thought about my plan, the more I was indirectly forced to think about dad and everything I found out. Everything's so jumbled up, and I need more answers.

Okay. Saturday morning sounds good. My mom has become quite the late sleeper, that means tomorrow is my opportunity. I need to calm myself down and distract myself somehow. I feel like I'm going crazy. This messy, stinky atmosphere combined with the mental torture of being involved in a cultist murder mystery probably isn't the best way to spend your summer holidays.

"I found 25 dollars. You can order some dinner if you like." My mom came into my room so suddenly. I quickly checked my pocket in case the note was sticking out; it wasn't. It's well hidden. "Sorry I haven't cooked in a while. I promise it'll all get better soon. We will cook and clean together." Her eyes were as dead and focused as an eagle fixating on its prey. I felt shivers running down my spine as she put the 25 dollars on the edge of my bed. She tried softening her face by giving me a melancholic smile, but I've already registered her internal suffering. "Don't you want anything? Have you eaten?" I blurt out, trying to make her feel better by expressing worry. "No, it's fine, sweetie. You're young, you need fuel to grow." She left, only leaving the money and a cold atmosphere behind. I'm not really hungry. I feel sick, rather. I can't sleep normally, I can't eat normally, I can't exist normally, there's only one thing on my mind. The gore of the first tape is constantly replaying in my head. I forcefully push a pillow into my face and let out a weak scream. Repeatedly slamming my head against the cushion, I somehow drift into sleep.

Immediately after waking up, sweating, as my pulse shot up immensely, I quickly began getting ready; light, breathable clothes, a pouch with the note and emergency bandages in case I cut myself on the broken window, a proper flashlight and enough space left if I find something important that I can take home. At exactly 6 AM, I left the house and made my way to the bus stop. I'll be driving for about 5 minutes and walking for about 7.

Inside the bus it's very humid. The continuous rain has finally stopped but the summer heat is punching back with full power. The air is hot and suffocating, and all I see are tired, sweaty faces releasing unpleasant smells.

5 minutes feel incredibly long when your nose and body are being assaulted by uncomfortable sensations, which caused me to awkwardly run out of the bus after I arrived at the right stop. The fresh morning breeze washes away the stench of the crowd left clinging on me, and I close my eyes, speed-walking in a straight line, feeling the sunlight occasionally shining through the trees and leaves above me and lighting up the ground, looking like small pebbles made from pure light.

I feel the energy shift as I approach my dad's house. It looks the exact same as the last time I was there. Logically, I thought, he still hasn't returned.

Carefully, I climb through the window into the house yet again and take out my flashlight. The fact that it's morning weirdly takes away my fear a little, probably because of the stereotype of paranormal or scary things only happening when it's dark out.

I already have the sticky note in my palm as I walk to the office room. I'm thinking about where to turn on the computer and what to search as I open the door, and sit down on the old chair.

My fingertips nervously glide behind the computer, searching for an on-button, while feeling dirt collecting beneath my nails. I feel a tiny button on the left, and after pressing it, I start to hear buzzing, as the light blinds me. I turn off my flashlight and push back the chair slightly, slouching towards the keyboard to slowly and carefully type in the password.

His home screen is pretty much empty; all I see is Word, an email folder, Excel and Firefox. Curiously, I click on Word.

It's pretty much empty. That was kind of expected, to be honest. But there is an unnamed file. After letting it load for a second, the title reads "Application".

"I am a father of 2 and have a wife. I am willing to keep this a secret and am very careful. I've always believed in the occult just like my grandmother, I'm not inexperienced. I am willing to do anything."

It's written incredibly unprofessionally and short, but from what I've gathered from the tapes, he somehow got accepted, or I guess the standards are incredibly low.

That was it, but I'm not done yet, I close the tab and go to the emails.

I immediately click on the first one, because the title "You useless idiot" is very intriguing and scary.

"You really think you can just go around offering people our services like it's nothing? Just laying notes and scripts about our rituals on your desk at work, letting everybody see? We now know why we've been getting so many applications and weird commissions from the common folk now. You're really in deep shit. You'll see. You and your family will pay."

I reread this email a few times, trying to piece together a concise story. As my hand shakes and trembles while I move the mouse around, I decide to look at the second newest. It's written by my dad himself, titled "We are entitled to guaranteed safety."

“Look, I know I haven't been the best member. Please, remember that I have a family. Or rather, had. This thing has ruined my marriage, but I haven't left. Doesn't that show my undying loyalty? Also, don't think I'm stupid. Apparently I have very important connections. My family is very important to you. You wouldn't hurt my wife because of my mistakes, you know what that would mean. So please, give me another chance, and let my son keep the money. I know it's wrong to steal from you guys, but it's not like I took everything. Just a little cut for my son since you guys give him nothing. It's my fault he joined, but he has the same motivation as me. We're short on money. Especially the divorce has taken so much from us. Please, for the sake of my wife and daughter, spare us. You need to understand me, please have some empathy. Don't you guys have family too?”

Again, I reread it multiple times, confused and shocked. My body runs cold as sweat drips down from my forehead. My fingers froze on the mouse. For the first time, the possibility didn't feel impossible anymore. Dad wasn't just hiding something. He was part of something. Not as a murderer, but in fact, possibly a victim?

The strangest part wasn't the emails. It was the fact that every message sounded like a different person. One was desperate. One was angry. One sounded like someone trying to protect us.

I scroll down and skip all spam emails to find one from Arthur, “Sorry dad”.

“Dad, please, let us be in this together. Mom is so stressed out and the divorce has taken so much from both of us. I know, I shouldn't have snooped around, but this risky ordeal could bring in so much money. We could gain connections to rich and powerful people. I'm not a baby anymore. I'll be careful. Please let me stay.”

I started gagging, but nothing comes out. My throat is sore and dry and I feel sick. I feel so terrible. I wish I could've done something. I should've acted my age, maybe applied for a mini job, but no. Now, dad and Arthur are gone.

“What are you doing, Elias?” An email from my mom. I'm expecting an angry email about the divorce or his behavior, which makes me curious. I often heard her frustrated rants about him being a deadbeat and two-faced, but that's all I've heard from her about him for a long time. I stared at the screen, replaying the words in my head again and again. “Deadbeat and two-faced.”

Those words didn't surprise me. I had heard them so many times. But what bothered me was the timing of the email. The date I'm seeing is about 5 weeks old, almost.

My eyes moved back to Arthur's email. “Sorry dad”.

I clicked the email again, searching for anything I missed. A date. An attachment. A hidden message. Anything. Then I noticed it. Every email from dad's folder had one thing in common. They all mentioned "safety", but none of them explained what we needed protection from.

I took a deep breath in and opened mom's email.

"You can't keep doing this. I don't understand why you're suddenly questioning everything after all these years. You knew what this was. You knew what we agreed on. I gave you a chance to accept your role, but you keep acting like you're some kind of victim. You're not. You're too much of a coward to look me in the eyes after everything we've done? You're seriously going to run away from our family because apparently money isn't enough for you? You made your choices. Arthur was never supposed to find out. You promised me you would handle it, but now there are consequences. People are asking questions, and I won't allow you to ruin everything we built. Don't pretend you're protecting the family. If you really cared about us, you would stop fighting and do what needs to be done. You always were too weak to understand the bigger picture. I hope you remember who helped you when nobody else did."

I read the email again. And again. With rapidly fluttering eyelids to prevent any early tears, I looked at the name again. "Florence Kingston". I analyzed the details repeatedly. Anything for closure, because what I'm thinking about right now just can't be right.

It couldn't be mom.

Mom was the one who stayed. Mom was the one who cooked dinner, who worried when I came home late, who told me dad was selfish and unreliable. Dad was the secretive one. Dad was the one with the tapes. Dad was the one who disappeared.

Not her.

My fingers hovered over the screen. Those sickening words above my fingers. Maybe she was just angry. Maybe she was talking about something else. Maybe I was forcing pieces together because I wanted an answer so badly, but then I looked at the email again.

"I won't allow you to ruin everything we built."

A strange feeling settled in my stomach. For the first time since I started searching, I wasn't wondering what dad was hiding. I was wondering what mom had been hiding from me.

I felt myself watching myself in the office, silent and still. Like I was watching a really bad movie. I couldn't move a muscle, my soul was completely dissociated from my body.

My eyes were burning from the bright white artificial light as I heard my blood flowing through my body, feeling my organs move inside me, and my limbs feeling like static.

The house felt so loud, as loud thoughts rapidly ran through my mind.

I forcefully pulled my phone out of my pocket, twitching with every move, feeling sicker and sicker with every second passing by. I'm looking for the next bus.

I return to those halls yet again, passing through the empty rooms, feeling like a ghost haunting a stranger's home. Before I could blink, I suddenly found myself at the bus stop, still shaken, rubbing my dry eyes and looking around. I feel as if a thousand eyes are watching me.

The bus ride felt like I was drowning underwater while everyone was going on with their day. I couldn't focus on anything, I couldn't hear anything, I couldn't move to scream for help. Returning home is inevitable. I'm just a kid after all.

I stand before the home that is now standing over me like an enormous deity, judging my every move and stalking my every cell. Its aura feels strange, infamous and unfamiliar.

As the door creaks open, I see my mother at the table with plates of food and glasses of mint lemon iced water, as the living room looks a little less messy than before. At this point, I'm not used to a relatively organized house with a mother who cooks lunch. It feels very outlandish watching this scene in awe, as my mom invites me to take a seat.

Eating was very difficult. My throat felt so tight, even the tiniest of bites almost made me choke. I chewed slowly on literal crumbs, as I pondered what I discovered today. Everything felt cold, as if I was in a dark, icy cave. The room was eerily quiet, as my mom watched me forcefully gulp down food with her hawk eyes. I felt like vulnerable prey in an open field, awaiting being pounced on. Brief gusts of wind brushed against my face after moving just an inch, giving me goosebumps.

“So...” my mom said softly and quietly, almost like a ghostly whisper, as she cut the fish on her plate. She chewed it gently and grabbed the drink she'd prepared, washing down the buttery salmon. Again, she looked up at me with a small smile.

“How was it at dad's house? Did you find anything?”

Suddenly, my heart stopped. I started to manually breathe in and out again and again, feeling like I'm suffocating in thick air and smoke. My head felt heavy and my eyes dropped downwards, not bearing to look her in the eyes.

“They wanted to desensitize you, Blair. And I wanted to be fair and give you some clues.”

She covered her mouth with her palm while looking painfully to the side.

“Your dad is at fault, I hope you know that. He was stupid. He was careless... rules are rules, they had to...”

She closed her eyes, and after opening them, turned further to the side.

“I hate stupid people... why couldn't he just...”

A tear rolled down her cheek.

“Mom...” I started crying hysterically as my entire world broke apart, still in denial, hoping for a good ending or a bad joke.

“This has been going on for generations, Blair. I didn't want to continue, deep down. But sadly, the benefits are incredible. We're on top of the entire state.”

She looked at me with guilty eyes as I slouched over and hid my face with my arms, trying to wipe away the waterfall of tears and snot.

“You monster... you killed them?!”

“I ordered them to be killed. Both of them.”

The woman standing in front of me wasn't a stranger. That was the worst part. I knew the way she tilted her head when she was worried. I knew the sound of her footsteps. I knew her voice telling me everything would be okay.

We both weren't making any eye contact. The house was an empty shell of its past, beautiful and happy memories. All that's left are secrets, distrust, and emptiness.

“I can guarantee you safety, Blair. You figured out too much, I never expected that, and I—”

“Just shut up, please...” I wailed in despair. I truly didn't want to believe anything she said or confirmed right now. I just wanted to disappear forever.

“Blair... please accept my offer.” She ordered in a seriously stern tone. Her sad, regretful eyes were slowly transitioning into a serious, scary stare.

I shake my head repeatedly and vigorously, as I cry more than I have ever cried in my entire life. My mother slips her hand in her pocket, and the other starts rubbing her forehead as tears softly run down her face. “Rules are rules. I'm so sorry, sweetie,” as she pulls out a gun.

My whining instantly stopped, together with my pulse. I immediately threw the chair I was sitting on at her as I screamed in fear, running for my life to the exit. She swiftly followed, trying to keep her aim steady at my head. “Sweetie, stop making this harder than it should be. Sooner or later you'll die anyway. Let me do this painlessly, please.” She shouted out to me, but I was focused on unlocking the front door as she came closer and fixed her aim.

My fingers slipped against the lock. Once. Twice. My hands weren't listening anymore. Behind me, her footsteps came closer. Calm, steady, almost like she wasn't chasing me at all.

“Mom, why? Why why why why-” I aggressively screeched as my hands kept slipping on the handle. I felt her eyes piercing my body from behind, tempting me to gamble my life and fight back. Suddenly, I had an idea.

“Mom...” The word tasted wrong in my mouth. I hated that I still called her that. Her expression softened instantly. “That's it, sweetheart. Just listen to me.” I nodded slowly, letting her believe she had won. And while she stepped closer, I reached behind me and grabbed the one thing she'd forgotten I knew about. I quickly turned the other way, running towards the basement. I still heard her footsteps ominously stomping on the ground behind me. I ran past the dark rooms, nearly crashing nose-first into a wall, but with my arm stretched out and the other holding the basement key, I quickly turned the key and pushed the door open while pulling the key out aggressively as I saw my mom approaching out of the darkness. I slammed the door in her face and locked it, as gunshots started flying through the cold metal door. “FUCK!” A bullet brushed against my arm, but it's not fatal. After locking the door, I make a sharp turn to the wall to avoid the continuous bullets. The silence after the gunshots was almost worse than the noise itself.

For a few seconds, I couldn't hear anything except the ringing in my ears. The environment felt like it had shrunk around me, the cold concrete walls pressing closer against my shaking body with every breath I took. The air smelled like dust, old wet grass, and the unbearable scent of fear that seemed impossible to escape. My fingers trembled against my arm where the bullet had grazed me, the pain sharp enough to keep reminding me that this was real, that my own mother had just fired at me.

I leaned against the wall, trying to stay quiet, trying to convince myself that if I didn't move, if I didn't breathe too loudly, maybe she would think I'd run further away. A ridiculous thought.

She knew me better than anyone.

She knew how I panicked. She knew I always held my breath when I was scared. She knew my unwavering, dangerous curiosity. She was aware of my unbearable need for closure and reassurance. She knew every little habit I had spent my entire life trying to hide from reality by

diving into it face-first, hoping for a lie, a joke, a good ending.

A small sound came from the other side of the door.

Her footsteps, circling around like a hunter making sure its prey was dead, or like a protective mother circling its sleeping baby in the wild; right now, I don't know which is the better comparison.

They pulsed slowly and carefully, a dampened echo coming through the bullet holes.

And somehow, those familiar, quiet footsteps terrified me more than anything.

“Blair...”

Her voice slipped through the holes as my chest tightened, her voice shooting zip ties at my heart and tightening them.

For one horrible second, I forgot everything. I forgot the emails. I forgot the secrets. I forgot the lies. Just for one second, I was just a daughter hearing her mother call her name. It reminded me of dinners, lessons and lectures, vacations, trips, surprises...

“I know you're scared,” she continued quietly. From the side, I stared at the door, my eyes burning.

“Scared? That's the word you're going for?” My voice came out weaker than I wanted. “You're standing behind a locked door after shooting at me because I found out everything you did.”

The silence that followed felt heavy. The zip ties are cutting into my heart.

“I didn't want things to go like this.” I closed my eyes as they burned hotter.

That sentence hurt more than if she had screamed, because I believed her. That was the part I hated the most.

My mother wasn't pretending, and wasn't some stranger wearing a familiar face.

She was the woman who stayed awake when I was sick. The woman who knew my favorite food, the woman who hugged me when I thought nobody understood me.

And she was also the person who had been hiding everything.

“I found the emails,” I whispered.

The footsteps stopped.

“I found the tapes.”

The air became cold as the sun hid behind dark clouds.

“You weren't supposed to find more than the first tape.”

The words left her mouth so quietly that they almost sounded like an accident, a slip-up caused by stress and the fatigue of being on top of the state, her facade vanishing because all she wants to be is a mother. My mom.

“You lied to me my whole life.” “No.” Her answer came instantly, like a dagger swinging with full speed. “I tried to protect you. I provided for you. I wanted this stupid generational plan to work. I didn't want to sacrifice anyone.” I wanted to swallow, but my mouth is completely dry. “You keep saying that like it makes everything okay.” “It doesn't. I know what I did. I know what I became. But everything I did was because I wanted you safe from them.”

I looked at the ground, still confused and utterly hurt. Maybe in her mind, everything she had done was an act of love, and that was terrifying, because people who believe they are protecting you don't always stop when they should.

I looked around the backyard, searching for a quick exit or something to protect myself with. The wooden entrance was rotten and dirty, the shed was shaking with every gust of wind, and all that remained intact were the seasonal vegetables feeding off of every rainy day.

My childhood, all stored in the same place where she kept her secrets, her plans, her knowledge, her motives, her family. That tiny wooden door was my emergency escape.

My feet dragged slowly on the grass, as I snuck closer to the exit. Behind the door, the handle moved. My heart stopped.

“Blair.”

Her voice was closer now. “I don't want this to be how you remember me.”

It felt like my legs were being held back by two elephants tied to them. The words hit harder than they should have, because I didn't want that either.

“I love you,” she whispered.

My eyes filled with tears. Stupid Blair. I knew she meant it.

She just loved me in a way that had destroyed everything we had.

“You love me,” I whispered back, my voice shaking, “but you still won't let me leave.”

There was no answer.

I pushed onward, continuing to sneak closer to the exit. And then I froze. The sound of the door opening behind me made my entire body freeze.

“Blair, please.” I looked back. She stood in the doorway.

Not like a monster, she looked like my mother. Her eyes were filled with fear, not anger. She was afraid of losing me. I ran through the exit, my legs shaking as I sped through the streets. The fresh afternoon air hit my face, sharp and unforgiving, replacing the suffocating air of the basement. I looked back, and saw no one.

I still ran, my shoes beating the pavement.

I looked back, and saw no one.

The trees beside me getting smaller and thinner as I rushed past.

I looked back, and saw no one.

At a distance, I heard a faint, singular gunshot.

I didn't look back, I won't see anyone.

And I still loved her. My arms craving her maternal embrace.

I just wish I didn't.