

WORLD OF HURT

by
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“The mind is its own place, and in itself, can make a heaven of hell, and a hell of heaven.”

— John Milton, *Paradise Lost*

I.

U never told me how u died.

The cursor blinked in the empty text field, beckoning him to begin. It would wait forever, or at least until the next power failure, and Andrei had a feeling that the girl half a continent away would too; that as long as he didn't log off, just sat staring at the dangerous keys, so would she, maybe prompting him now and then but never giving up, waiting out the standoff until another night was over and both their time zones had greeted the dawn.

Fingertips to keys — did it have to be this hard? Just tell her what happened...

I drowned.

Two simple words, a fact of life that nobody could take away from him. No, he owned it. Owned his death the way Midas owned gold.

Im sorry. That mustve been awful. How old were u? How long ago?

Easy questions, time and demographics. He could handle these.

14 years ago this past winter. I was 17.

He knew what was coming next, had braced himself for it the moment he'd started down this path.

Howd it happen?

Except he wanted it, deep inside. He must have. Why else would he be here? Nobody puts a gun to your head and makes you cultivate friends — well, *friend* was a stretch, more like an acquaintance here — that you would never set eyes on. Six months from now he'd be doing some computer housecleaning and would delete Kimmy's name from his instant messaging buddy list, because a list of one wasn't a list at all, but something to be ashamed of, and what would be the point of keeping it when he never used it anymore.

My friend Ty got a new car for Xmas. It was a few days after, not even New Year's yet, and we were still on break from school. I guess it was a dumb time to give him a new car. They should've waited for his birthday next summer. Middle of winter in Pittsburgh, all that snow and ice, and you couldn't get Ty out of the car. But actually, we were from a suburb called Fox Chapel. It's the kind of place where lots of kids get cars for Xmas.

We were out drinking one night and he put us in the Allegheny River. It was over quick, probably, but it doesn't seem like it, not when every little thing is so vivid. It was a bitterly cold winter and the river was frozen over pretty thick. We got the doors open while the car was still caught in the ice, kind of balanced there like if you'd pressed a toy car into a pie crust, but we'd barely gotten out when everything dropped from underneath us. Ty caught himself on the edge of the hole and managed to haul himself out. Good reflexes. I got pulled under the ice.

It flowed more easily than Andrei had thought it would. Like ripping off a Band-Aid. The hardest part was getting started. The rest was just momentum.

Jesus! How awful! What kinda car?

He stared at the screen, feeling the vague gnawing of an insult until he realized Kimmy was joking.

Sorry. Just thought u could use a laff. A jolt outta the Big Bad Heavy.

Give her points for sussing him out through the couple thousand miles of wire between them.

OK, seriously ... what was it like, if u dont mind me asking?

He hadn't thought much about it for a long time, not in specifics, but he could still recall the way he'd described the experience to the psychiatrist he'd seen a few years ago. He'd fumbled for words then, dredging everything up like muck from the bottom of a river, but tonight found he could distill it to its essence:

It was monumental. An accident like that, everything you're up against is the size of a mountain. The cold: It's so total, and there's nothing you can do about it. Plus the panic. That's as hard to fight as the cold. Maybe harder. You're in the water and you can't believe what's happened, and at first you have that flash that everything will be OK in a couple minutes, you just want to be warm and dry again, and you've got just enough time to think something stupid, like, OH SHIT, Mom and Dad are gonna kill me. Then you realize they won't have to. Because you've done the job on yourself. You've come up for air and all that's there is ice, and more ice. You missed the hole. Your fingertips are numb but you've got just enough feeling left to realize they're skimming along the underside of the ice, and you know you're caught in the current. That's when the panic really sets in. But you can't fight it for long. 20 seconds or so? Then the water starts coming in and after a little of that the fight leaves you pretty quick. Except you're not dead yet. You're just sorry, and sad, in this distant way ... or I was, at least. For the next little bit, it was like flying past a window and seeing my life disappear on the other side. A big white window because of the snow on the ice, and the full moon on the other side. And then even the sorrow was gone, because I guess I was too.

Several seconds of a blank text field — he supposed she must've been processing it all. Not so rapid-fire on her response this time.

4 how long?

38 minutes.

Wow. & everyone telling u its a miracle u survived, right?

Until I was sick of it.

& no brain damage!

Well, that's debatable.

She didn't say anything, just fired back a string of emoticons, faces that cracked open and shut as they laughed in perfect unison. He wished he could delete them, their subtle and regimented mockery.

It's the cold, he typed. Hypothermia. It preserves you for a while, a suspended animation kind of thing. You can get away with being dead and then revived a lot later than you can in the summer. They've pulled kids out of frozen ponds, dead an hour or more, and after they were resuscitated they were OK.

Xcept u werent in a pond. Howd they FIND U?

I popped out from under the ice downriver, at the lock and dam. The ice was broken up there. Some paramedics and other rescue guys were already there waiting, just in case.

They had come to the part where normal people were supposed to pump up the miracle talk: What a lucky guy, your guardian angel was keeping an eye on you that night — all the things that oozed out when the person's fundamental perspective was ignorance.

Kimmy knew better.

So u died, she wrote instead. The tunnel, white light, dead relatives waiting 4 u, the whole routine?

Textbook.

How long b4 u started 2 remember the way it REALLY happened?

He looked at the number keys across the top of the keyboard. Until this moment, he'd never thought of them as a decade of his life, stretched between an accent mark on one side and dashes on the other.

8 years

& u havent blown yr brains out yet? (Paradoxically, it's been known 2 happen!) Or

screamed yr throat raw until they sedated u? Pretty impressive, Andrei. U may B 1 of those that make it.

It was the first dumb thing Kimmy had said, of course, and she probably wished she could take it back, that she didn't make such a habit of typing before thinking.

He thought he'd sooner kill the rest of the world before he would kill himself.

He put fingers to keys, to tell her so.

And what was the point of making it when you already knew how much there was to dread once death grabbed you and held on for good?