

# Doors

The white pill sits on the palm of my outstretched hand.

I am Alice, and the pill is my little bottle with a label that says "DRINK ME." It will make me tiny. Then I can live off all of the regular sized food in the fridge for the rest of my life. I will befriend the rats that live in my walls and I will learn how to squeak and we will gossip about mice and ferrets until one day I break my neck in a trap.

I am Jack, and the pill is a bean that will turn into a beanstalk. I will eat it and the stalk will take root in my stomach and burst out of my chest through my heart. But maybe then my soul can climb or fly up the thick vine and rest in peace with the giants in the clouds.

I am Superman, and the pill is concentrated Kryptonite. Eating it will forever drain me of my powers and it might even kill me but that is ok because I am tired of having my powers. I don't want to be Superman anymore I just want to be Regularman, who doesn't have to worry about saving people all the time.

The white, disk-shaped pill sitting in the palm of my hand seems to glimmer and so I toss it up into the air, tracing its elliptical path with a lazy gaze. It arcs towards me, tumbling end over end, and in the flickering light that seeps through my bedroom window, the pill looks like a small, illuminated orb. As it begins to drop I tip my head back and open my mouth, allowing the pill to land on my tongue.

I grab a half empty beer from my bedside table and wash the Percocet down with a healthy gulp. Twenty minutes until it will set in. I grab my glass dolphin piece from the drawer and inspect it. It has half a bowl from last night and I smoke it to ward off the upcoming stomachache. Lying back on my bed, I close my eyes and wait for bliss.

I can feel the blood in my veins and in my head. My ears are filled with it, softly pulsing through my body, filling me with heat, coursing faintly into the tips of my fingers and toes, making them tingle with the opiate's gentle caress.

My face softens into a grin and I know it's a stupid grin but I don't care because I am alone in my room and I am alone in my apartment. I roll off my bed and walk on the tips of my toes around JJ's terrarium to the center of the room and find the remote. After turning on the TV, the room is filled with chattering voices. I don't care what is on. I just want noise to surround me and compete with the thrumming blood in my ears. I drop down onto the couch. I am tired.

I sit and watch for some time, and then my face begins to soften again. My droopy grin sags deeper and my eyelids start to fall lower over my eyes. The blood in my veins is pushing outward against my body like it's trying to escape and I feel like a balloon. My fingers are gigantic. The buzzing of blood in my ears crescendos and I decide not to fight sleep any longer, quickly passing into unconsciousness.

A sharp rapping on my front door pulls me out of my dreamless sleep. It's unclear how long I was out but I don't feel as high so it must have been a few hours at least. I wiggle my fingers and toes and find they are surprisingly stiff. The knocking comes again.

I slowly lift off the couch. My body feels like concrete. I lumber over to the door with slow, thunderous steps that ring out in my ears and rumble in my knees as each footfall meets uncarpeted floor.

When I reach the door, I raise my right arm and press my palm onto the smooth oak, leaning my full weight into it. I am always surprised by the door's coolness; even in the sweltering summer heat the wood feels like a veneer over an icy core.

"Who's there?" I have to raise my voice to ensure the sounds can trickle around the thick door, making its way through the oaken veins to the other side.

"Evan it's me." Her voice is so soft I can barely hear the words. But the voice itself is enough, I slide the chain lock free and twist the deadbolt until it clicks, then I turn

my back to the door and walk to the kitchen to get myself a glass of water. My head is beginning to throb and not in the good, Percocet-induced kind of way.

The hinges groan softly and I can tell the door has yielded inwards. Her faint footsteps follow. I wait until I hear the sound of the door clicking closed again before turning around to face her.

“Evan...”

“Hey sis,” I murmur, “what’s up?” She looks sorrowful.

“You.... How are you?” Her eyes are on her sneakers and her shoulders are hunched. Her thin brow is creased, but it’s hard to notice. Such smooth skin, not yet wrinkled by the pressures of hardship and doubt.

I lean my weight slightly forward, with my hands pressing hard into the cold counter, looking over it at her and I wait, silently, until she lifts her gaze.

“Do they know you’re here?” I’m angry, but I don’t know why.

She shakes her head.

“Why did you come? And how did you even get here?” My tone is harsh, surprising both of us, and her eyes fall back to her shoes. She starts twisting her feet so they point in then out then in. The innocence of youth. I wonder if she is about to cry and immediately regret my cruelty.

“Mom and Da-”

“Wait.” I cut her off. “I need to feed JJ, will you help?” I don’t wait for a response but instead walk around the counter to the table in the middle of the room.

“Here,” I say, offering her the small white bottle. “Just give him a small handful.”

She takes the bottle in her hand as she looks at me, then looks down at the tank. Slowly she kneels in front of it and pops open the lid to the bottle. She shakes a collection of the small, cylindrical bits into her open right hand, but rather than invert that hand and dump the pellets into the tank all at once, she replaces the bottle on the table and from her open palm carefully selects a single pellet.

With great delicacy she reaches into the terrarium, extending her hand towards JJ with the pellet on top of her unfurled index finger. As the distance between finger

and beak drops to inches, JJ snaps his head backwards into his shell, and an empty void replaces the turtle's head.

Rather than retract the finger, she keeps it hovering an inch before the headless hole, and then she begins to make clicking noises that are almost certainly imperceptible to the amphibian's ears.

"Leave it," I say sharply. The anger is back. "He's too stupid to know you're helping him." She keeps her hand suspended, not even glancing up at me.

"Leave it!" I bark as I grab the wrist connected to the hand that contains the majority of the pellets, pushing it overtop the terrarium and shaking it until all the food drops into the tank.

I release the wrist and out of shock or fear she moves away from me and ends up toppling backwards onto her butt, looking up at me with a watery gaze. I take a step back, eyes widening with incredulity at my own temper.

"I'm sorry," I mutter, turning my gaze down at the floor. When I look back up she is standing and staring at me, the terrarium now in between us. For several ticks, only my bedside clock is audible.

"They are going to stop paying your rent," she says flatly, then adds, "after next month, they are going to stop." I close my eyes and let a long deep breath out. Somewhere in the back of my head I knew that this was coming, but still, the shock of hearing it is a blow. I sit down on the chair behind me.

"When did they decide?" I ask quietly.

"Yesterday."

"Dad's choice?"

"No, that wasn't the part they disagreed on...." She pauses and it seems her eyes widen. "You can come back."

She waits for a moment, then continues quietly, in almost a murmur, "You can live with us again. They are going to call you tomorrow."

"They can't want that," I say with too much spite. I feel like crying or yelling. "I will never believe that they want that."

“Mom does,” she says softly and earnestly. And then even softer still, “I do too Evan. I mean it.”

And I can tell she does. So innocent. How does she not realize what I would do to the family. I would drown them all. I myself am drowning and I would drown every last one of them as they tried to pull me from the mutinous swell. They don’t know how deeply sunk I am. The water is dark and unapologetic and insatiable and it would suck them down to the depths. I cannot let that happen. I refuse to let that happen.

“Evan?” Her eyes are wet now, and with a small shock I realize that mine are too. I raise the backs of my hands to rub. “Evan...” She repeats.

“Do you know that when dad was 12 he saw two people drown at the beach?” I ask. She looks confused.

“I don’t--”

“The first person was just a swimmer. A stranger. He must have been too tired, or had a condition, or was caught in a tide. But he was out there. Way out there. Dad was with his entire family and they had no idea anything was wrong until the lifeguard’s high pitch whistle cut through all other noises.” I paused for a moment to see that she was leaning in, waiting for me to continue the story.

“After the whistle, the lifeguard jumped to the sand and ran right past his floatation device to the water and started swimming. By the time he reached the swimmer, the beach was silent, everyone’s attention focused on the rescue. But the thing was, it wasn’t a rescue. Neither one of them came back.” She and I were both silent for a few breaths.

“Dad told me that story just after I got sent to juvie for the first time, before I decided to drop out. He slapped me hard, harder than he ever had, just before telling it, then broke that record with a second slap after finishing, but this time on my other cheek, so that I ended up with an evenly pink and raw face. I was up all night from the pain and from the screaming fight that mom and dad had over it.”

“I remember that night,” she says mournfully.

“I think you should leave now,” I say with as little emotion as possible as I look down at JJ in the terrarium. He has finally extracted his head from his shell and is making his way towards the scattered pellets. When I look up I see she is still gazing at me, but has taken a step or two backwards, away from the terrarium and closer to the door.

“Will you say yes when they call?” She asks. I nod and she stares, piercingly, narrowing her small eyes at me.

“I will,” I lie, “I promise.”

With a last hard look, she turns and opens the door, then turns back and says, “I’ll see you soon Evan.”

“I love you sis,” I say as she slips out of the apartment, allowing the heavy door to swing shut.

I stand still for a moment before walking over to the door. Again I place my right palm against its cool surface, then lean into it until my cheek feels the icy wood like a salve against the slap from years ago that burns now from the memory. I twist around and slide down until I am sitting on the floor with my back pressed against the thick oak.

And in that moment I somehow know, without fully understanding how I do, that she has not left yet, that she is still outside on the other side of the door, that if I were to open it she would be standing there or maybe she would be sitting as I am with her back to the door and opening would cause her to fall backwards into the apartment once again, and then I would be able to hug her and tell her the truth and tell her goodbye.

I sit here, with less than three inches of wood separating us and yet I know that the wood is a division between two worlds. Crossing the barrier would not help me, and it would certainly hurt her. It would tear her world apart. And that is when I discover my new mantra.

It is the mantra I would repeat to myself over the next week as I pack up the apartment into a suitcase, ignoring the calls from them with a firm resolution. I

would repeat it to myself as I buy the ticket and board the train away from my family, my lifeguards, and my past, swimming and kicking away from the solid land, not yet rising towards the sunlit surface, but neither descending deeper into the inky blackness below.

I saved her.

I saved her.

I saved her.