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Chewing Gum

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We said hello on a Friday. Not a very extravagant greeting, simply a passing discourse among acquaintances. Off to class we went without much time to waste.

I enjoyed our hellos all the same. You were wearing khaki pants and a flannel shirt that day, your usual, always cheerful attire. Perpetually smiling, your vibrancy radiated from your appearance.

I stood in line behind you at the convenience store that afternoon as the dark-faced man in front of you purchased his cigarettes. You stocked up on chewing gum for the weekend.

As I walked home through the crisp winter air, I thought of you for the first time in a long time. How many years has it been since we first met? What stopped us from being truly great friends? That was the end of that thought.

By the time I got home, I had forgotten all about you. Mental fixations of schoolwork and making plans for the weekend, desperately trying to come up with something worthwhile to do were to no avail, giving way to misery and boredom. Not the end of the world, however, but it could have been avoided — like so many other things. Work that night went better than expected. It wasn't the most exciting night of work by any means, but at least there was something to do, hustling about the restaurant, making drinks and serving food. More reflection as thoughts flowed as freely as the beverages from the tap.

Leaving with my hands shoved in my pockets to fight off the cold night air, I thought of you once again. I pictured our meeting earlier today, curt and laconic but also, for some reason, a fond and clear memory in my mind. I could still see your cheerful face but couldn't hear your voice. Your lips formed a silent "hello", but it looked more like you were saying "good-bye" when I replay it. This thought stayed with me as I drove home.

Saturday was a complete blur. I remember cutting the grass, but not much else. That night was miserable; in a bad mood from not doing anything, I walked around the house, not speaking to anyone or even making eye contact. I snapped at my mother at one point, but I quickly retreated to my room. Concentration was unattainable.

I found it a bit peculiar, as it happened for the third time that I thought of you Sunday morning waking up. This time, only your face was visible amidst a gray haze. Your features were accented against this blur. I didn't even bother to replay our meeting in my mind — the thought was becoming redundant. I then tossed you out of my mind as easily as I would have thrown used paper into the wastebasket.

You killed yourself on a Sunday. Then you were really gone. At first I didn't believe it when they told me — I didn't want to believe it. At least you weren't my best friend, or a huge part of my life; at least the most we said to each other was "hello" every so often. Thank God I didn't know your favorite color or anything, I told myself as I drove home from wherever I was when I found out.

At home, I thought about you more and more as the seconds and minutes dragged on. Why did I feel this way? Why am I so despondent? I could do nothing but sit and think. The contemplation of you being anything but alive and well paralyzed me with intense emotion.

An hour or two went by as I kept trying to picture you—not in line at the store but on the floor of your room. I drove myself mad with that. I can't imagine what your little brother must have thought when he found you.

I began to feel anger towards you. Why? Why the hell did you do it? You had fantastic parents, good friends, and a seemingly decent life. Looks can be deceiving I suppose.

That night, I didn't sleep much. My mind was full of random thoughts. They churned inside of my head as if a tornado had moved in. I longed for answers and closure. Neither was found.

I visited a small, dark corner of my mind. There, I wondered how you did it. There were guns in the house. I wasn't surprised when they told me that you shot yourself. The thought was like battery acid, corroding my mind.

Monday morning was the official period of mourning. People everywhere were sad, those that didn't know you, those who only recognized your name, and that was sad. The school was an insane asylum, leaving me wanting to scream, "Shut up!" and tell everyone to mind his own damn business and stop crying over someone that he didn't even know in the first place. It broke my heart to know that people only cared now that you're dead.

By mid-day, you could tell who the phonies were. You should have seen them; laughing and joking at lunch, casually conversing on the way to class — those who, a few hours ago, had been sobbing and praising the memories they had of you. I tried my best to ignore it, but try as I might, it was everywhere. I ate a few bites of food during my break, seemingly tasteless. There were a few moments in which I did not even desire to swallow. Imprisoned to the cafeteria, everyone around me seemed either too happy or too sad.

After sitting there for what seemed like two more hours, I hastily made my way to my English class. If there was one place that will make me feel any better it would be in a room full of books and stories. For about an hour, we discussed a piece of literature, something about a bad mother and a daughter with a lot of hidden potential. We also talked about you — I almost expected it. You were the hot topic in every other class, why did I think that this one would be any different? I was glad when I got out of there.

Feeling strange, I skipped my last class and drove around town. A bit of driving would calm me down as I could let my mind run away to some distant place and feel safe in the solitude.

A minute or two on the road was all it took. I still didn't feel good, but driving through the gorgeous day relieved me of some of the pain. I managed to end up at the same convenience store at which we had met just a few days ago.

As I pulled up, I sat there in my car and studied the building, its white brick walls with wide, clean windows full of bright neon beer signs, and enticing advertisements. The parking lot had a few bits of trash lying here and there, and the white parking lines needed to be repainted. No one was pumping gas. I stood there beside the car, the sun warming my face and arms and the steady stream of traffic floating by.

► **Pike Place** | Aubrie Salzman

I walked into the store, and a rush of apprehension hit me as the door closed behind me. There I was, standing where you stood on Friday afternoon. The place was empty except for the cashier. I approached the counter, hesitatingly.

I checked my wallet, stalling for time, but time for what I did not know.

I reached up to grab a fresh pack of cigarettes, but halfway there, my hand suspended in the air. I thought about you again. In a split second, my mind went back to Friday, but this time, I could see you clearly and hear you amicably say "hello." Fighting off the tears that would come soon enough, I reached down below the counter and grabbed a pack of chewing gum, enough to last the weekend.



► **Untitled** | Nadia Blackmon

