

Let It Burn by Ruth Hogan

I look into the mirror in my small, dark, cluttered bathroom, but I don't know why. I do this all the time, but it seems quite pointless. It is always the same thing. There is always the same person looking back at me. The same plain, pale, brown eyed, dirt brown-haired girl that has been there for the past 4 years. Eternally staring back at me.

I look into her eyes, where a sparkle used to live. A flicker of life that used to always be there. Now empty. Eyes that used to define happiness. No longer. That used to have flecks of yellow and green strewn throughout them. But now just brown, cold, inhuman, and almost lifeless. Eyes, the windows to the soul, absolutely empty.

I stare at the mouth etched into a constant straight line, like concrete. Not even a frown, although so close that you wait for the corners to turn down, but they don't. Chapped, red lips, small and thin. Only recently getting used to not smiling the smiles that used to light up rooms. When those rare smiles do come, they are always tight and forced.

It is the same girl, the same face staring back at me day after day. The same girl who used to love music, but now prefers silence. Who used to play piano so well, but now doubts she could tap out even the simplest tune. Who used to enjoy getting lost in crowds, but now would rather sit alone. Sometimes I don't even recognize that girl as me.

Where is the fairy child I used to know? The little girl who would run through the rain, sing at the top of her lungs, and spend time in trees just because. Who couldn't stand to leave a flower unsmelled, a puddle unsplashed, a button unpushed. The young me who always smiled no matter what life threw at her. Who was joined at the hip to her best friend. Who had a best friend.

Emily.

I haven't had a best friend since... Emily.

I can't even look into a mirror without being reminded of her.

She had been my best friend since we were in diapers. We did everything together; there wasn't a week that we were apart. We were like sisters. She had blond hair, bright blue eyes, and dimples. Everyone said that when she got older she was going to be a heart throb. If she had only made it that far.

There was a drive-by shooting in her neighborhood. That night she was playing in her front yard. Not a particularly smart thing if you lived in our part of town, but our guard was down since nothing had happened in months. Apparently one gang had made another mad and, of course, revenge was imperative. The bullet that hit Emily was actually meant for her brother. We always knew that we were at risk, but we denied it. No one ever thinks that it can happen to them. She was in the wrong place at the wrong time. That's all. She didn't do anything wrong. She was more innocent than anyone I have ever known. She was only 10.

It all went down hill from there for me. Her death destroyed me. That's when life lost meaning, when the sleepless nights began. I didn't want to have to think, and sleeping

meant thinking. Then the paranoia started; I was constantly afraid. I started to sink deep into depression. Into an abyss of darkness from which I couldn't escape.

A tear falls down the face in the mirror. Proof that I can still show emotion, that I can still feel; something that I often doubt. Every now and then, when I least expect it, I am proven wrong. It is never pretty when it happens either. It always comes at the worst times, in the hardest ways.

I often wonder while standing here as I am now; why do I have to face this alone? How come no one understands or even seems to care? Why me? Why did they take Emily from me? Mostly I wonder why they took Emily from me.

It is a bit of a cruel rhetorical question. Usually it doesn't seem to have a real answer. Every now and then though, the answer will seem to be just out of reach. I struggle to make it to the place where it is hiding, but when I get there it is always just a dead end. I don't think I will ever have a solution that will bring me any comfort.

Why did they take Emily away from me? They. It. He. The divine being. God. Abba. Yahweh. Whatever you want to call it. Often, when someone close to them dies, a person begins to hate that being or just not believe in IT. I've never been able to do that. I've never really had a religion, but have always held beliefs. I don't get how people can deny that there is something greater than us. Something unseen. But I don't know It well enough to hate It, and I can't believe that there isn't something there. Sometimes I wish I could. I think it would be easier. Then I wouldn't have to know that there was some reason, some plan behind Emily's death. Then there wouldn't have to be a reason why they took Emily away from me. Or even a "they" to do it. Then I could hate someone, anyone, other than myself.

I look down, because I just can't stand to look in the mirror any more. Look at that face for another second. My eyes travel to my wrists. My mind travels even farther.

Remembering...

About 3 months ago I was home alone while my mom went to the grocery store. Just having had lunch, I took my plate to the sink. Before I got there, I dropped it. For a while I think I just stood there in a daze, looking at the sharp pieces. White. Glassy. Sharp. Pieces. Then I picked one up. I brought it to my wrist and held it there. Silently debating whether to use it or not. I thought about the pain. The end of that pain. Maybe even being closer to Emily. It was a way out. Sure, the cowardly way out, but a way out none the less. So I did it. I cut my wrists. I dragged the sharp glass slowly across my bare skin, hardly pressing down. Blood began to pour out, at first in tiny droplets that led to a constant heavier flow. After seeing the blood, the full realization of what I had done sickened me, and I wished with all my heart that I hadn't decided to make that cut. Luckily I missed death by mere centimeters, literally. I didn't push hard enough; the ragged porcelain didn't penetrate deep enough. I can't stand to think about it or what would have happened if my aim had been a little better. The jagged scars on my wrist are now the only physical signs of that stupid stunt.

I reach into one of the drawers in the cabinet under the mirror, grabbing the small pill bottle that my new doctor gave me. I twist off the child proof cap with ease gained from practice, turn the white bottle upside down onto my opened palm, and let two purple pills

fall into my hand. Into the mouth followed by a glass of water and they are gone. My doctor says they'll make me better: human again. They were the only reason I really came in here, and I almost lost them in my thoughts.

I no longer have any reason to be here anymore, so I turn toward the door. Before I leave, I kiss my finger and put it to the picture of Emily, taken only weeks before her death, taped to the mirror. Where I can see it whenever I need to. She is arm and arm with a fairy child I used to know, the little girl I used to be. I look back into the mirror one last time. Back into the eyes of the person I have become. The twinkle that was once there is gone, possibly forever, but in its place is a spark. A glimmer of hope. Residing in the eyes of the 14-year-old girl I am now. The eyes that have been empty for four long years. It may be just a spark, an insignificant glint, but perchance someday more. Even the smallest ember can become a fire. Even my tiny spark of hope can grow to more...

Let it burn.