

On Friday

“Sasha Diane Gold, where were you last night?”

Sasha glanced up to see her mother walking downstairs in a white shirt and red tie; her work clothes. She had a look on her face that Sasha had seen one too many times, one of both suspicion, and mild anger. Sasha sat at the dining room table, a spoonful of Mini Wheats suspended halfway between the bowl and her mouth. She looked to the chair next to her for clarification as to what in the world her mother was talking about, but Sam was preoccupied with reading a book that, undoubtedly, was for an assignment due in about two hours. Her twin sat there, repeatedly swiping back stray strands of brown hair that kept creeping into his downturned face. People were always mixing the two up; they looked alike, both tall as far as seventeen-year-olds go, both with freckled faces, and both with light brown hair that Sam described as “super dry dirt” in color.

“Where *were* you last night?” Her mother repeated the question.

“I was asleep.” Sasha replied at last, deciding that an answer from Sam at this point was too much to ask for.

“No you weren’t.” Her mom replied, walking into the kitchen to put away the mess Sasha had left from making her breakfast.

“I think I would know if I went anywhere.”

“Then where’d you go?”

“I said I was asleep.”

Her mom glanced over her shoulder at Sasha.

“So you just got up and walked around unconscious?” She said with a fake calmness that barely masked her anger.

“No, mom.” Sasha replied, she herself still completely lost about what her mother was on about. “Please don’t bring that up. It’s embarrassing, even if I don’t do it anymore.” She added, silently thanking every existing deity that it was just Sam who could hear them.

“Well you most certainly weren’t in your bed.” Her mother said, and, not giving Sasha a chance to respond, added, “were you seeing a boy?”

Sasha laughed at this.

“Really?” She asked. “Mom, if I *was* interested in someone, it wouldn’t be anybody from my high school. Everyone there is either a jerk or the biggest, most stereotypical nerd I have ever seen.”

Mrs. Gold turned with a confused look.

“‘Jerk?’ ‘Nerd?’ I’ve never heard you talk like this before.” She said, sitting down across from Sasha with another bowl of Mini Wheats. She seemed to have calmed down a bit from her usual paranoid state. Mrs. Gold handed Sasha some vitamins as she asked: “What changed?”

“Whaddya mean?” Sasha questioned.

“You said yourself that you were a nerd.”

“What? At what point did I say that?”

Mrs. Gold thought back for a second before replying with, “on Friday. Before you went to school. You said. . .”

She trailed off, finishing quietly with an “oh.”

“I don’t remember that.” Sasha said, ignoring her mother. Then with a shrug, added, “whatever.”

Sam looked up at his twin, who in turn met his gaze with another ‘I have no idea what mom’s talking about’ shrug. Their mom didn’t notice.

As Sasha stood to finish getting ready for her day, she absent-mindedly caught her mom's glare for just a short second. A glare full of something odd. Suspicion? Worry? She dismissed it internally.

Just mom being motherly. She thought.

She walked up to the entryway closet and opened the doors, looking for her shoes. She spent five minutes searching before shouting over her shoulder at her mother.

"Where're my shoes?"

"They're in there." Her mom answered back from the dining room. "I put them back after you left them out. Again."

Sasha searched harder for another minute before calling over her shoulder once more.

"I don't see them."

She heard her mother's chair slide across the hardwood as Mrs. Gold got up to help. She glanced over Sasha's shoulders.

"They're right here." She said, picking up a pair of new-looking white sneakers. New, that is, except for--

"Is this mud?" She asked, examining the caked-on dirt on the sides and bottom of one shoe. "Sasha, these are brand new!"

"Those aren't mine." Sasha replied. "I don't know where mine are."

"I'm holding them. Don't try to pin this on--" She choked. Regaining her composure, she finished with, "someone else."

"No," Sasha replied again, ignoring her mother's stutter. "Mine aren't white. I *know* my own shoes, and these aren't them."

Her mom sighed and looked at the ceiling.

“Sasha, that’s enough. Just put your shoes on, and don’t get them any dirtier.” She said.

“But these aren--”

“They *are*. Just wear them.” Said Mrs. Gold, through gritted teeth.

Sasha turned to keep looking for her real shoes, when she heard something behind her.

She turned again to see her mom with her hand over her mouth, tears on her face.

“Mom?” Sasha said. “Mom, are you alright?” She stepped closer and put her hand on her mom’s arm. Mrs. Gold wiped her eyes.

“Yeah.” She said. “Yeah. I’m fine. Just. . . Just wear those shoes. Even if they aren’t yours. I’m going to. . . Go get ready. Or whatever.”

Mrs. Gold walked upstairs, leaving her Mini Wheats to soak in a bath of soy milk.

“What was that all about?” Sasha asked Sam when their mom had disappeared.

Sam shrugged, not looking up.

“Looks like you hurt her feelings. Maybe she thought you’d look good in those shoes.”

He said.

“But they aren’t mine. I don’t know whose they are.”

Sam shrugged again, looking at his sister this time.

“Well, let’s just get ready for church. Make sure she doesn’t have any reason to, I don’t know, break down again.”

Sasha agreed to that plan. Mrs. Gold came downstairs dressed for church a minute later.

“Your dad’s not going.” She said.

The twins and Mrs. Gold went outside. Sasha went to open the garage door for her mom as she usually did, but Mrs. Gold just kept on walking, not even acknowledging the gesture.

“Looks like we’re walking to church,” said Sam, following his mom. Sasha closed the garage number pad and ran after the two with her muddy shoes.

The walk took ten minutes, most of which were spent in silence. Sasha noted a tension in the air, an unspoken conversation. As she was about to ask her mom ‘why so quiet,’ she was interrupted.

“I don’t want you driving anymore,” said Mrs. Gold.

Sasha chuckled quietly at this.

“Why not?” She asked when she realized that her mom’s expression hadn’t changed from the serious look that had been there the entire walk.

“Because it’s just not safe. I don’t need anything happening to you.”

“That’s not a reason. I’m a safe driver. Well, safer than Sam, anyway.”

“Sasha!” Her mom shouted as her daughter said this. Then, quieter but no less angrily, added: “We don’t joke like that!”

Sasha stepped back to put some space between her and her mother, in case the latter decided to strangle the former. Sam glared at Sasha, both from not heeding his warning about provoking their mother, and for insulting his driving skills.

“Okay. Jeez, I’m sorry.” Said Sasha.

Their mom sighed.

“I’m just. . . Stressed.” Said Mrs. Gold.

“About what?” Sasha asked.

“Nothing. Not right now, anyway.”

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The day progressed slowly due to some after-church errands and, thanks to a lack of improvement of Mrs. Gold's mood, the three family members came home that night with fast food since she didn't want to cook. The family walked into the house with Burgerville bags in hand, which they set on the table.

"Go get your dad." Mrs. Gold said to Sasha.

Sasha, not wanting to make her mom angry again, went upstairs and knocked on the door across from her parent's bedroom.

"Yeah." Came a huffy voice from the other side. Sasha walked into her parents' office and found her dad in the dark. Mr. Gold sat hunched in his office chair, a game of *Portal* on-screen, and what appeared to Sasha to be a small mountain of various wrappers and dishes. It suddenly occurred to her why she had had so much trouble finding a bowl for her cereal that morning.

"Dad." She said when her father failed to acknowledge her entrance. "There's food downstairs."

He simply said "okay," and continued staring unblinking at the screen. Sasha did her usual shrug. Mrs. Gold would probably yell at him for not coming downstairs for Sunday dinner, even if it was just fast food, so she began walking back towards the stairs. She bumped into her mom on the way down.

"He's probably not going to come." Sasha said in passing.

Mrs. Gold sighed and walked into the office. Sasha could hear the two arguing as she walked back down to the dining room.

"--Can't disconnect yourself from us. I'm upset too. I had a small breakdown this morning, but we need to work through this."

Sasha froze at the bottom of the stairs.

What're mom and dad upset about? She thought.

A small grunt of confirmation came from her father, and she heard a rare sound: His chair rolling away from the desk. She was just sitting down as her parents came downstairs.

The twins' father looked like he'd been in there for a while. His skin was bleached white from the computer screen, and his eyes were slightly bloodshot. He scratched at his unshaven jaw as he sat at the table, and he didn't smell any better than he looked.

It began to occur to Sasha that her father might not normally be like this, but she dismissed the thought.

Both mom and dad are uptight. And dad's just into his games. She thought.

The four ate in silence, except for Sam, who didn't eat at all.

Sasha looked around as they all ate. Finally, tired of the lack of conversation, she asked, "what's wrong with everyone?"

The three of them looked at her.

Her mom put down a less-than-half-eaten burger and said quietly: "We're all just. . . Recovering, that's all. It's difficult, but we'll do it."

"What's difficult?" Asked Sasha, genuinely confused about what her mother was referring to. Her mom sighed again for what felt to Sasha like the quintillionth time that day.

"Maybe they're tired of you asking such stupid questions." Sam chimed in.

"Shut UP, Sam!" Sasha scolded, staring him in the eye. When he backed down, she turned back to her parents, who stared back at her wide-eyed.

"What?" She said. Then, in a frustrated tone, said: "Oh. Yeah, yeah. 'Don't talk to your brother that way, Sasha.' I know. We don't need his little comments now, though."

Her mom continued to simply stare at Sasha. Then she looked at Sam. Or rather, Sasha noticed, *through* Sam. Then back to her. Mr. Gold stared down at his salad.

“Sasha.” Said Mrs. Gold slowly. “Who. . . Are you talking to?”

“You.” Sasha replied.

“Before that.”

“Sam.”

“Just a coping mechanism.” Mr. Gold said to his wife in his usual monotone voice. “Her way of dealing with it.”

“Sasha.” Her mom said, slowly again. “You know Sam is dead, right?”

Sasha laughed. This was the funniest thing she had ever heard.

Sam’s dead? She thought. Now mom and dad are getting into the whole ‘Sam dies every episode’ thing!

She continued laughing until tears started to stream from her eyes. Finally, after a minute, she stopped. Wiping the tears off of her face, she said: “Anyway, I don’t know why that’s so funny!”

Mr. Gold slammed his hands down on the table and stood up, stopping Sasha’s finishing giggles in their tracks. He turned to go back upstairs, but Mrs. Gold stopped him.

“Get me the pictures, please. We’ll show her.” She said, after convincing him to stay.

Sasha’s laughter had completely died, replaced by a growing sense of dread.

“Show me what?” She asked.

Her mom was silent until Mr. Gold came sulking back from the office a moment later with a piece of paper in hand. He handed it to his wife, who in-turn, showed it to Sasha.

“What’s this?” Sasha asked.

“It’s an magnetic. . . Reading-- No, resonance image, or something. It’s a scan of your brain.”

“When did I get this taken?”

“Take it slow.” Said Mr. Gold, finally looking away from his food. “Make sure she understands. That’s what the doctor said, remember?”

Mrs. Gold nodded, sighed once again, and asked her daughter: “What happened last week?”

“Um.” Sasha thought back. “We went miniature golfing. There was a pop quiz in math. One of my friends slipped on some spilled soda.”

“Okay. Do you remember anything *else*? Say, an accident?” Asked Mrs. Gold, in a tone that suggested speaking to a toddler.

“Mom, I’m not a baby. Give it to me straight. What happened last week that has everyone so worked up?”

Mrs. Gold opened her mouth to say something, but choked up, finally putting her face in her hands when she couldn’t muster anything other than a ‘Sam--.’

“Sam died.” Said Mr. Gold for her, rather bluntly, as if he couldn’t believe it himself. “Sam... Died in a car accident on Friday.”

“No, he didn’t!” Said Sasha, standing up from the chair. “He’s sitting right there!”

And with that, she reached out to punch his arm as the two always did when rough housing. But Sam was always just out of reach, and Sasha didn’t notice that she would never touch him until she fell forward onto the chair that he was supposedly sitting in.

“No.” She said, feeling around the seat as if he were going to appear back in it. “No. But- - But I *saw* him. And *heard* him! He was real, mom, I swear!”

“Sasha,” Mrs. Gold finally squeaked. “The prescription you’re on has side effects like hallucinations.”

“No. No, where is he?”

“He’s dead, Sasha.”

“But where is he?!”

“He. Is. Gone!”

“But what is *dead*??”

“That’s enough!” Mr. Gold finally called over his wife and daughter. The two stopped shouting, not realizing that they had slowly been getting louder.

“I’m just confused.” Said Sasha. “What exactly is ‘dead?’”

“I don’t get--” Started Mrs. Gold, before being interrupted by her husband.

“She’s *confused*. That’s one of the symptoms, remember?”

“I’m not sick!” Said Sasha, finally sitting back down at her chair. “I’m not ill or crazy or anything, so don’t say ‘symptom’ like I’ve got some disease. I want to know where Sam went.”

“Look, hon,” said Mrs. Gold, “let me tell you what happened.”

She exhaled, preparing for a painful recollection.

“On Friday night, you and S-- S-- Your *brother* went out and saw a movie with your friends.”

She stopped, visibly holding back tears. Sasha waited for a minute with a sinking feeling in her stomach, before her mom continued.

“On the way back, as we were told by the police, Sam was driving into the intersection. He didn’t have his headlights on, and it was dark, and he hit some poor boy and--”

She drifted off. Mrs. Gold covered her face again as tears started making their way down her cheeks. Mr. Gold continued, with a monotone voice so intense, it made the feeling in Sasha's gut worse.

"We were told that you were in critical condition, and that. . . Your brother was dead on arrival. They said you had taken a blow to the head. So we let them do the MRI scan, and we got *that*." He motioned to the picture on the table, a hint of disgust behind his single-toned voice. Sasha picked the picture up and examined it more closely.

"They said you had a serious traumatic brain injury, and they said you may never be the same again. So they gave us some instructions, some symptoms to watch out for, a medication once you could actually move-- We were supposed to watch for confusion, amnesia, depression, personality changes. Things-- Things like that." He said, finally breaking his monotone with a voice crack. "And you're telling us that you can't wrap your head around the concept of *death*."

"I think you're confused, Sasha. Profoundly, medically confused." Squeaked Mrs. Gold. "I think your perception of reality might not be what you think it is."

Sasha glanced back and forth between her parents, both of whom stared at her with weak anticipation.

Finally she said: "I still don't get it."

Her parents let out held breaths.

"What don't you understand?" Asked a tired Mr. Gold.

"Everything you're telling me. Death, brain injury, medications. None of it makes sense. I just can't wrap my head around these concepts!"

"No." Mrs. Gold squeaked again. Then, with a bigger voice, said to no one in particular: "No. You can't anymore."