

MY BROTHER THE STICK MAN

Written by

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ILLUSTRATED CARTOON

Amateur, colorful drawings blend together into a rudimentary animation, set to music:

It portrays a KNIGHT riding toward a DRAGON.

A MAIDEN is tied up nearby. Before the Knight reaches them, the Maiden shakes off the rope and cuts off the Dragon's head.

INT. BEDROOM - NIGHT

A young girl: Laura (16, smart but self-absorbed, wearing a beanie and sweater) is watching the CARTOON on her cell phone.

There's a knock on her door. Her father THOMAS' voice is heard.

THOMAS (O.S.)
Laura. He's still waiting for you.
I told him you'd play.

Laura rolls over in bed, and writes a TEXT MESSAGE:

"THANKS ROBERT. I LOVE THE MUSIC! XOXO"

Then she has a second thought, deletes the "XOXO" and sends the message.

Also beside her on the bed is a SKETCHBOOK, open to a page with one of the colorful illustrations from the cartoon.

She shuts the sketchbook and takes it out of the room with her.

INT. LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

It's a simply but tastefully furnished suburban house.

Laura's brother JAMES is 18, in a polo shirt, slightly nerdy, introspective but tries hard to be sociable. He's instantly likeable.

He's dumping out the pieces of a CHESS SET. This particular set is colored red vs. white.

Laura sits down on the floor across from him. She remains distracted on her phone.

James begins setting up the board.

JAMES

There's a piece missing. That's weird. Dad and I just played.

LAURA

Is it an important piece?

JAMES

All the pieces are important. But yeah, without the king I don't have much of a chance of winning.

He finishes setting up the board so that he is on the red side. The only piece missing is the red king.

LAURA

Welp, guess we can't play.

JAMES

I have an idea. Can I see your drawing book?

Laura glares at him, holding her sketchbook tight. Then she shouts to someone offscreen.

LAURA

Dad! Do I really *have* to play chess with James?

THOMAS (O.S.)

Please can you just play one game, Laura? He asked to play.

James shrugs at her.

LAURA

Well then you play with him.

THOMAS (O.S.)

I would, but I've got so much work to catch up on before the weekend.

Laura sighs and glares again, then reluctantly hands over the sketchbook.

LAURA

Be careful. All my new drawings are in here.

James opens the book and sees all the pictures from the dragon cartoon.

JAMES

Oh, these are really cool. Are these the ones Robert said he was going to edit into a video?

LAURA

Yeah.

James flips through the pages.

JAMES

I just need a blank page...

On a page near the beginning, he finds a picture of a smiling STICK MAN holding hands with another stick figure.

JAMES (CONT'D)

Haha. I remember this.

LAURA

Shut up. Don't look at that.

JAMES

That was supposed to be me, wasn't it?

LAURA

It's like ten years old. I should just throw it away.

James grabs the book and dances it around, as if to animate the stick figure.

JAMES

"No don't throw me away! What did I ever do to deserve such a horrible fate? I like existing!"

LAURA

So lame.

JAMES

But seriously. I like that my smile is so big here. It's happy me.

LAURA

So what did you need the stupid book for?

James finally finds a blank page. He reaches to a nearby table for a RED PENCIL.

On the lower corner of the page he draws a RED KING chess piece, with some surreal flourishes.

He carefully tears out the corner of paper so that there's no white visible at the edges of the drawing, and he puts it on the chess board in the place of the king.

The sketchbook he places back on the floor, turned back to the page with the stick man.

JAMES

Oh wait. It needs a mean face. Now it's your enemy. "Errr. I'm the Red King! I declare war on you! Fight me or else!"

He draws on a silly mean face on the king. In spite of herself, Laura laughs.

JAMES (CONT'D)

There. Now we can play.

Laura sighs and moves her first piece.

LAURA

You're lucky I remember the rules. Who even plays chess?

JAMES

Me. And dad when he was a kid. It's a healthy brain game.

LAURA

Like your brain needs any help. You know you can stop proving you're a freaking genius now.

James falls silent. The game continues throughout the conversation.

LAURA (CONT'D)

Hey...weird question: did you ever kiss Nelly?

James is caught off guard by the question.

JAMES

Um. Maybe. Yes. Why?

LAURA

Just wondering. Do you like kissing? And I'm only asking because Robert's a little bit like you - ya know, kinda weird. I was under the impression that nobody didn't like kissing.

(MORE)

LAURA (CONT'D)

But then I tried to kiss Robert yesterday and he said he didn't want to. Brett and Amber think it's really weird too. Everybody's pretty sure he's not gay, so I'm just like, confused.

JAMES

I don't know. Everybody's weird differently, I guess.

LAURA

I *thought* we were going in the direction of being more than just friends, and he keeps making my animations for me. But now...

She shrugs.

JAMES

Maybe you should ask him about it.

LAURA

I probably just won't talk to him until he figures out what he wants.

A pained look comes over James' face.

JAMES

Don't do that. Don't...don't do that.

LAURA

Brett is such a dick to Robert though. I'm pretty sure *he* wants me and God knows *he* doesn't have issues with kissing girls, but then again, like, he's Brett, so it's not like he's looking for anything serious.

JAMES

That is a lot of people drama.

LAURA

Feel lucky you don't have a lot of people drama. It's just all...aaarrrgh... confusing. Frustrating.

JAMES

Sometimes it sounds nice. I don't know.

(MORE)

JAMES (CONT'D)

I can never figure out if it would be better than just being alone all the time.

James half-smiles, but it's a forlorn, bitter smile.

LAURA

What was dad talking to you about earlier? He must have thought you were upset.

JAMES

Upset?

LAURA

Or else he wouldn't have made me play a game with you. He obviously wanted you to feel better.

JAMES

Oh...just...I won't be passing eleventh grade next month.

LAURA

What??!

JAMES

It's nothing though! Just some academic grades stuff.

LAURA

But you've always done so much better at school than me! That's a big deal! Everyone's been talking about what college you're gonna pick. You're only gonna be one class ahead of me?

JAMES

Everyone keeps saying it's a big deal but it's really not. I don't mind. High school is fun.

LAURA

Okay. Nobody thinks high school is fun. Liar.

The game continues in silence.

LAURA (CONT'D)

Why am I seriously still playing you? We both know how this is ending.

JAMES

You never know until it's done. We don't have to play anymore if you don't want to.

A voice comes from the other room: MARY, their mother.

MARY (O.S.)

Laura! Dinner's ready but I can't do everything myself. Help me get this out of the oven.

LAURA

Yeah I'm coming!
(then to James)
Sorry about the game. You can just beat me while I'm gone.

JAMES

That wouldn't be fair.

Laura walks out of the room. As soon as she's gone, a blank look comes over James' face. We see the face of someone struggling with depression

INT. DINING ROOM - NIGHT

Laura sets a steaming pot onto the dining room table. She's joined by THOMAS (40s, professional, stressed and drinking a beer) and MARY (40s, prim and proper, uptight).

Mary frantically sets down the last few items and then they all sit down. Thomas distractedly sends some text messages then sets his phone beside his plate.

THOMAS

Just last minute work stuff.

LAURA

You made green beans again?

THOMAS

It all smells great honey.

LAURA

I won't be eating green beans. No thank you.

MARY

Alright. Where's James?

LAURA

Robert and I made another animation. I can send it to you if you want to watch it.

THOMAS

Right now? Laura, it's almost your finals week...

LAURA

What? I've still been studying.

THOMAS

I hope so. Sometimes I worry your slacking off is a bad influence for your brother. Anyway, James knows dinner's ready, right?

MARY

I called out to everyone. I shouldn't have to go around handing out personalized invitations.

LAURA

He was with me. He heard you.

They sit in silence for a moment, waiting. Mary's face starts turning pale as she stares at the food she's made.

THOMAS

I'll go see what's keeping him.

MARY

Yes. The potatoes are getting cold.

LAURA

You know dinner doesn't need to be a whole operation every time.

Mary glares at her.

Thomas walks away from the kitchen. We hear his footsteps as he trudges through the house. Sounds of knocking on a door.

THOMAS (O.S.)

I think he's in his room. James! Are you in the bathroom? Laura, did he say he was going out?

LAURA

No, he didn't go anywhere!

THOMAS (O.S.)
James. Dinner's ready. Hey James,
you in here?

There's a sound of knocking, then of a door opening, and then silence.

MARY
Forget it. I'm eating.

Mary digs in to her food. Laura reluctantly follows suit. Then, the sound of a moan from Thomas in the other room.

THOMAS (O.S.)
No... No... James. James! No!

Thomas' moans become shouts and tortured cries.

MARY
What's the matter?

Thomas runs back into the kitchen. His eyes are full of tears. He reaches for his cell phone on the table.

THOMAS
I need to call 911. I need to call
911. It's...it's James.

He puts the cell phone to his ear and runs back toward the bedrooms.

Mary, concerned now, stands up and follows.

Laura wrinkles her forehead, realizing something is wrong.

LAURA
What? What's wrong with James?

THOMAS (O.S.)
Yes, I need an paramedic, or an
ambulance, right now...3721 Oriole
Street...

Laura stands up and slowly walks out of the room.

INT. HALLWAY - NIGHT

Laura approaches as Thomas goes back into James' bedroom.

Mary walks behind him. Stopping at the doorway and looking inside, Mary SCREAMS.

Laura's eyes fill up with stress tears.

LAURA

Mom?

Laura runs toward the door. Mary intercepts Laura and grabs her, pushing her away from the door.

MARY

No! Don't look in there. Please don't look. Please just, go back to your room. Don't look.

THOMAS (O.S.)

It's a... He used bedsheets, from the ceiling fan. He's not breathing! I don't know! I don't know! I can't tell. I can't tell!

Laura overhears her dad, and her face freezes in shock.

EXT. CEMETERY - DAY

A small gathering, just over a dozen people and a PRIEST, stand around the casket being lowered into the grave.

Mary stands a few feet away from Thomas. Her cheeks are covered in tears, her face flushed. She looks indignant.

Thomas is openly weeping.

Laura stands apart from them both. She's staring intently at the casket, her eyes open wide and questioning.

Another girl, NELLY (17, sweet and nerdy) is crying.

Another family is present: DONALD (45) and APRIL OPAL (45) with their children ROBERT (16) and BETH (19). April makes a fervent Sign of the Cross. Beth appears impatient.

Robert slowly approaches Laura.

ROBERT

We all liked James.

He tries to grab Laura's hand, but she pulls it away and crosses her arms. She turns and walks slowly away.

Thomas turns to try and go after her. Mary grabs his arm and stops him, shaking her head.

INT. LIVING ROOM - DAY

Laura sits in the couch, staring at the chess set on the floor. It is still set up, in the middle of the game.

Thomas comes out of the hallway carrying a cardboard box. He looks at Laura, sets down the box, and steps toward her.

THOMAS

He, um...

Thomas' eyes well up with tears and he chokes up. He reaches into his shirt pocket and pulls out an ENVELOPE.

THOMAS (CONT'D)

...this, for you.

He hands the envelope to Laura.

It's sealed. On the front is written: "FOR LAURA TO READ."

Laura holds it in both hands, staring at it.

THOMAS (CONT'D)

There's nothing else. He didn't say...that's all he left.

He continues to sit beside Laura, expectantly. But Laura shows no signs of opening the letter.

THOMAS (CONT'D)

You're not going to...? Okay. When you're ready.

A moment longer he sits beside her.

Then he stands up with the cardboard box and reaches for the chess board.

Laura leans over quickly. Her arm shoots out and she grabs Thomas by the wrist before he can move the pieces.

They make eye contact for a brief moment, and Laura shakes her head "no."

THOMAS (CONT'D)

Okay.

He stands up and steps away, leaving the chess board alone.

Laura remains frozen in place, staring at the envelope in her hand.

INT. SCHOOL HALLWAY - DAY

Laura sits alone, arms crossed, outside an office. Her gaze is distant, her face expressionless.

INT. SCHOOL OFFICE - DAY

Mary sits across a desk from:

MISS JOHNSON, the principal. She's around 40 and, while very professional, comes across as friendly, talkative and even bubbly.

April Opal, who is a teacher, sits beside the principal.

MISS JOHNSON

Laura's been a real trooper, really, really great, with this being such a tough time. There's just some questions after...well she did attend her English test, but the paper she turned in...it was blank. She hasn't been participating in her other classes, though God bless her, she has been showing up. But the teachers, particularly Mrs. Opal here, have expressed some concern. I think that, given the circumstances and with finals week approaching, it all might just be too much. So, Mrs. Highland, I'm more than happy to overlook the blank test. Her other grades have been... consistent...so if you and Thomas are agreeable, I'm willing to let her stay home for the rest of the term and I'll still graduate her to the tenth grade.

Mary nods distantly.

INT. LAURA'S BEDROOM - DAY

Laura lays on her bed. With a blank expression she stares up at the ceiling.

Beside her head is the envelope.

Her phone lies elsewhere on the bed. It vibrates. Caller ID says "ROBERT."

She ignores it.

It rings again. From: "AMBER."

She ignores it.

A text message appears: "LET'S GET SMOOTHIES AFTER SCHOOL. I'M BUYING."

She ignores it.

Beside her on the bed sits her SKETCHBOOK, open to the page with the stick figures. She never glances at it.

INT. HALLWAY - DAY

We hear the toilet flushing as Laura walks out from the bathroom.

She stops as she sees the closed door of James' room. There's a sign on the door that reads:

"My own room is my own room, and I shall allow nobody to play in it but myself - Oscar Wilde kinda."

Laura puts her hand out to grab the doorknob, but she stops short, staring at the sign on the door.

A tear appears in her eye, but refuses to fall out.

Then, she hears a door slam, followed by raised voices from the other room.

THOMAS (O.S.)

I'm not saying you could have done anything, but that's not the point. What's it supposed to take for you to stop washing your hands of responsibility?

MARY (O.S.)

I never knew how to talk to him. That's always been true. And he's always been depressed.

THOMAS (O.S.)

Depressed? Just...*depressed*? Everybody's depressed, Mary! Don't just write him off that way.

MARY (O.S.)

That part of him he got from you. I told you when he was seven, I told you I couldn't deal with all that.

THOMAS (O.S.)

You're telling me, to my face, that it's my fault.

MARY (O.S.)
Oh you asshole. You just said the
same thing to me!

Laura listens to the argument without moving or changing her
expression.

INT. LIVING ROOM - DAY

Thomas is sitting on a couch, and Laura is sitting across
from him. Thomas wears a conciliatory frown and holds a
beer.

THOMAS
I'm going to be spending some time
living downtown. In a hotel,
probably, at least for a while.
Maybe I'll find something a little
cheaper after that. Um. I'll come
visit, on the weekends. You can
come visit me whenever you want.
Just pick up the phone and give me
a call and I'll come get you.

LAURA
Just probably not on weekdays.

THOMAS
Right. Probably not on weekdays.

Beat.

Thomas looks down at the chessboard, which is still set up
from the unfinished game.

THOMAS (CONT'D)
Do you...do you want to finish that
game before I go? I know it was
never really our thing, but...

LAURA
No! It stays how it is.

Thomas nods sheepishly.

Laura looks closer at the set. The paper Red King is
missing. Seeing that, she frowns and folds her arms.

LAURA (CONT'D)
Why is the Red King gone?

THOMAS

The Red King? It was there last week when I played with... I don't know where it is.

LAURA

No, not the piece. The Red King he made.

Thomas just frowns.

INT. DINING ROOM - NIGHT

Laura sits at the table, watching Mary prepare another large scale dinner. Mary is currently trying to strain the water out of a steaming pot of pasta.

MARY

Can you help me with this?

Laura doesn't move from the table.

MARY (CONT'D)

Please? I only have two hands.

Laura very slowly starts to get up.

MARY (CONT'D)

Hurry! I can't hold this forever!

Just before Laura reaches the sink, Mary manages to successfully lift the pot and dump out all the water.

MARY (CONT'D)

Shit. That's hot. That could have gone so much worse. Next time step to it a little faster when I ask for help, okay?

Laura says nothing and sits back down.

Mary brings the pasta over and joins Laura at the table.

It's a big project of a meal with many different courses set out.

MARY (CONT'D)

Well, it looks like we're going to have leftovers, doesn't it?

Mary robotically starts spooning food onto her plate. Laura watches blankly.

INT. LAURA'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

Laura lays on her bed again, aimlessly staring at the ceiling.

Also on the bed: the envelope, and the open sketchbook.

Again she ignores her phone as the text comes in:

"JUST CHECKING IN TO MAKE SURE YOU'RE ALRIGHT. LOVE DAD."

Laura blinks, and blinks. Her eyelids are heavy.

As her eyelids flicker off to sleep, we see:

DREAMLIKE IMAGES FLASHING

Nostalgic, glowing POV shots of James smiling... laughing...reading, in close-up. Various shots, one after another.

The images start to distort. They become blurry.

JAMES (V.O.)

Everyone keeps saying it's a big deal but it's really not... We don't have to play anymore if you don't want to... If you don't want to... That wouldn't be fair.

James' smile suddenly turns to a scowl...to a grimace...to a snarl. These changes are quick and startling.

INT. LAURA'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

Laura's eyes flicker as her dreaming gets more intense.

Then the final images of James snarling become...

NIGHTMARE

James' face, completely distorted into a horrific snarl, is superimposed over the image of the cartoon RED KING with the mean face.

The image lasts only a brief moment.

JAMES (V.O.)

Errr. I'm the Red King! I declare war on you! Fight me or else!

INT. LAURA'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

Laura wakes up with a lurch, in a cold sweat.

She punches her bed. Then she punches it again, harder.

Her motions causes the envelope to fall off the bed. It flutters to the floor.

Hearing the light sound, Laura glances to the side of the bed - sees the envelope has fallen.

She reaches down for it.

Picking up the envelope, she sees there's something underneath...

It's the little cut-out paper RED KING with the mean face, sitting on the floor.

She recoils a little in surprise. Squints at the image.

Then she reaches down to grab it.

LAURA

There you are.

But it MOVES.

It scoots away, sliding by itself along the floor before she can touch it.

In shock, Laura falls forward and tumbles off her bed.

She collects herself fast and looks up.

The Red King is a few feet away. His face is animated now, smiling maliciously at her.

RED KING

Haha. Have you been hurt? Good.

It speaks with James' voice, using the "funny mean" voice with which he'd mimed the stand-in chess piece. His language is antiquated, as expected from a medieval chess piece.

He moves and talks like a roughly drawn cartoon character, and can only move on flat objects like the floor.

Laura freezes. Uncertain. Afraid.

LAURA

Why?

With a final snarl, the Red King shoots away from her. It goes up the side of the desk and slides out of sight.

Laura's eyes are wide. She slowly gets up off the floor.

As she presses her hand onto the edge of the bed to lift herself up, she hears another small voice:

STICK MAN

Ouch!

She withdraws her hand. From underneath the sheet emerges another animated character: the STICK MAN from the sketchbook.

Laura withdraws, even more surprised than before.

STICK MAN

If you're trying to squish me, the joke's on you: I only exist in two dimensions. You can't squish someone who's already flat!

The Stick Man also speaks in James' voice, but in the voice he had used while playfully talking about the stick figure. His face is constantly pulled into a dopey, lovable grin.

Laura glances up at the sketchbook on the bed.

The page which had held the drawing is now blank except for the stick image of young Laura.

Confused, she flips the page back and forth.

STICK MAN (CONT'D)

Are you looking for, uh, me?

LAURA

How did you get out?

STICK MAN

The more important question is, how did he get in here, and why.

LAURA

Who?

The Stick Man "walks" - though he only travels in two dimensions - across the bed to try and get a better look at the desk. He whispers loudly.

STICK MAN

Shush! I doubt he went very far and it's probably best if he doesn't hear us talking about him.

LAURA

The...

STICK MAN

The Red King, yeah. He's quite the angry little guy, isn't he? I figured he would turn up, so I'm here to help you get him.

LAURA

How do you know about him?

STICK MAN

We met at the chess game. Talk about a bad first impression. "*Fight me or else*"? Yikes. I don't even like to think about he and I both being from the same sketchbook. Does that make us, like, siblings?

At that word, Laura falls silent and stares at the floor, lost in sad thoughts.

The Stick Man's eyes turn sad even though his smile remains.

STICK MAN (CONT'D)

What? Oh, is it something I said? Come on. Now's not the time to be depressed.

LAURA

I'm not...depressed.

STICK MAN

No? Well that's good. There's too much to do to waste time on that.

There's a noise from the other side of the room. A bumping, shuffling sound from the desk. Laura lifts her head to look.

She stands up and walks slowly toward the desk.

STICK MAN (CONT'D)

What...where are you going? Are you sure that's a good idea?

LAURA

You said yourself we need to get him.

STICK MAN

Sure. Yeah. Get him.

LAURA

That's why you're here. You said.

Stick Man turns and climbs down the bed. He's weaker and clumsier than Red King, and after climbing a bit of the way he tumbles onto the floor.

STICK MAN

Yes. Yes. True. But. He's also very dangerous and we need to be careful how we approach this. We need a plan before we go storming in headfirst. A strategy. Otherwise he'll outsmart you!

Laura starts to pick things up on her desk, looking around. Nothing is moving and nothing seems weird, yet.

As she moves things around, her eye falls on an old PHOTO on the desk, that had been obscured. It's a framed picture of Laura and James as kids, smiling together at a park.

She freezes up, looking at the picture.

Then from the corner of her eye she sees a fast movement, accompanied by another soft shuffling sound.

Startled, Laura jolts just enough to shake the desk.

The picture falls to the ground. The glass shatters.

At that, Laura snarls. Just a hint of anger.

RED KING (O.S.)

Oh. That is positively wonderful.

Laura turns around slowly, to see the Red King has moved up onto the wall. He's still projected in two dimensions but he's now a few inches larger than he was before. He continues growing, making little armless stretching motions.

STICK MAN

Oh no. I told you to be careful!

RED KING

You over there. Mister "I'm so wonderful and life is all sunshine." You think you can get me? That's right. You talk too much. Time to shut you up!

The Red King dashes down the wall onto the floor, and speeds across toward Stick Man.

STICK MAN

Uh...help?

RED KING

You should never have left the
safety of your page, you gangly
little stick!

Stick Man backs away, but he's slow. He reaches for the leg
of the bed and tries to climb it, but he slides down.

STICK MAN

Laura? Please?

Laura watches for a moment, unsure what to do.

The Red King speeds toward Stick Man, his teeth opening wide
in evil laughter.

STICK MAN

No! I like existing. What did I
ever do to deserve such a horrible
fate?

Laura takes a few big steps closer to the bed.

Just in the nick of time, her foot comes down on top of the
Red King, pinning him to the floor. We can hear only muffled
sounds from him.

Stick Man breathes a nervous sigh of relief.

STICK MAN

Whew. That was...wow. Did you see
those teeth? Like a paper shredder.

Laura stoops down, keeping her foot in place, and slaps her
hand over Stick Man, pinning him too by his stick torso.

STICK MAN (CONT'D)

Ow!

LAURA

Why are you?

STICK MAN

Why...? See I owe you, are be
a...double-u... Are we not talking
in letter names?

LAURA

I don't understand why you're here,
or why he's here, or why he's after
me, or why you're after him, or why
he's after you.

Stick Man sighs, despite his eternal smile.

STICK MAN

He's angry. And he wants you to be angry with him forever. And I'm trying to stop that from happening.

Laura softens a bit. Some sort of understanding comes over her.

As she relaxes, her foot lifts a little off the ground. Out scurries the Red King and slides away, looking a little frazzled but just as evil as ever.

Hearing the sound of him getting away, Laura turns around.

STICK MAN (CONT'D)

I told you. He's a slippery one.

Laura lifts her hand so that Stick Man can move.

LAURA

I'm sorry.

STICK MAN

Don't mention it. You're scared. You're confused. You don't know what's what. But you will. We'll make sure of that.

Laura sits back down in bed, looking defeated.

LAURA

I'm tired. I haven't been sleeping very well.

Stick Man struggles trying to get up onto the bed. Laura extends a hand. Stick Man climbs on (still resembling something drawn onto her hand) and she lifts him up.

He rests on the bed, thoughtfully "dangling his feet" off the edge.

STICK MAN

Why haven't you been sleeping well?

LAURA

I bet you could take a good guess.

STICK MAN

No actually. Until just a while ago I lived in that book. I don't really know much about the world, despite my demeanor of wisdom and street smarts.

(MORE)

STICK MAN (CONT'D)

But if you have a problem, I would love to hear what's on your mind.

LAURA

I...want to figure out why...something happened. But I don't know how. I don't know how.

STICK MAN

You know, nobody ever found anything by not looking. Not trying to tell you how to live your life. Just saying.

LAURA

No. You're right.

STICK MAN

And from what I've seen - pardon my mentioning it...I mean, I've been in that book without anything to do myself - you haven't been spending much time away from right here. Are you trying to figure stuff out in your head just by thinking about it?

LAURA

That doesn't work. I wish it did.

STICK MAN

Then, get out of here. Go find your answers. Whatever and wherever they are, they're out there, not in this room!

Laura nods thoughtfully.

LAURA

I need to sleep, for now.

She starts to roll back into bed.

STICK MAN

Oh, um. That's great. You need your rest, but I can't let you do the sleep thing just yet.

LAURA

Why not?

Stick Man lowers his voice to a very light whisper, and walks closer to Laura's ear.

STICK MAN

Why do you think you were having bad dreams when you tried to sleep? He's going to keep trying and trying to get into your head, and he won't give up just because you stepped on him. Like I said before, we need a good plan.

INT. LAURA'S BEDROOM - NIGHT - A LITTLE LATER

Laura is laying in bed, her face pointed toward the wall. Her eyes are shut.

The sketchbook is open to the empty torn page (where the Red King was drawn), just behind her on the bed.

The Stick Man is hiding behind Laura's head, peeking out over her ear so he can see the room but stay low-profile.

Movement in the distance: the Red King slides out from between two books in a bookshelf.

Malice on his face, Red King glides slowly and silently across the floor.

With very little effort he climbs up the bed, gets onto the sheets and creeps toward Laura's head.

First he has to cross the blank page of the sketchbook. Red King looks down at it with some trepidation. He's about half the size of the page now.

Confidently he moves forward onto the page.

STICK MAN

Now!

Laura's arm, twisted under her back and hidden under the sketchbook, slams the book closed.

RED KING

No...no!

The Red King is trapped inside the book.

Laura sits up, excited. With a satisfied sigh she holds up the book.

Stick Man gives her a "thumbs up."

STICK MAN

Haha! I told you! I told you it would work! We got him.

(MORE)

STICK MAN (CONT'D)

Just like I said we would. That's right I'm "Mister I'm so wonderful and life is all sunshine," and he can't do anything about it! But mostly...I'm glad you can finally get some peace and quiet. Well peace anyway. Maybe quiet is something you've had enough of.

Laura carries the book across the room and deposits it onto her desk.

When she turns back around, the Stick Man has descended down onto the floor. He's by the door, waving to her.

STICK MAN (CONT'D)

I'll see you in the morning, okay?
I'll come with you on your search for answers.

LAURA

And where are you going right now?

STICK MAN

To my room.

Stick Man disappears out of the room, under the door.

Laura walks over to the bed and glances at the envelope, still laying on the floor. She picks it up, glances at it for a moment, but then slips it under her pillow.

Laura lays in bed and shuts her eyes. After a few deep breaths, she drifts off to sleep.

INT. DINING ROOM - MORNING

Mechanically, Mary pours two bowls of cereal, fills them with milk and sets them on the dining room table.

Instead of sitting down, she turns back to the kitchen counter, pours two more bowls of cereal, and takes them to the table.

Setting out four places for breakfast, she sits at the head of the table and eats in silence, staring straight ahead.

Laura walks out of the hallway. She's dressed and moving toward the front door.

MARY

There's cereal.

LAURA
I'm going somewhere.

MARY
(*mystified*)
You're...going somewhere?

LAURA
Yeah.

MARY
Okay.

Laura stops before reaching the front door. She turns around and looks at her mother for a moment, frowning with pity.

Then she walks back to the dining room table, sits down beside her mother and starts eating cereal.

In silence she finishes alongside Mary. Then the two share a glance. Laura stands up and walks out of the house.

EXT. SUBURBAN STREET - DAY

Laura rides her BICYCLE down the road.

She looks beside her and sees the Stick Man sprinting alongside, flatly projected on the sidewalk.

STICK MAN
You didn't think I'd really let you
go alone, did you?

Laura's face doesn't quite break into a smile, but she does look more relaxed.

LAURA
I bet you can't keep up.

STICK MAN
Bet I can.

Laura starts to bike faster. The Stick Man has to move his legs at an unreal, cartoonish pace in order to keep up with her.

Laura passes by a house where she sees Robert standing in the front yard, mowing the lawn.

Seeing her, Robert waves, and offers a wry smile.

Laura looks thoughtfully at him. She lifts her hand for a little wave, but doesn't slow down.

EXT. NELLY'S HOUSE - DAY

Laura parks her bike at the edge of a driveway and walks toward the house.

Stick Man walks along below/beside her.

STICK MAN

Do you know what you're going to say?

Laura shrugs.

LAURA

Not really.

STICK MAN

But you're here. You made it this far. That's the important part. Do you want any advice from me? Maybe I can be helpful. If I'm not helpful, then what's the point of me anyway?

LAURA

I'll be fine. It's just Nelly.

Laura walks up to knock on the door, but freezes just before she does it.

STICK MAN

Are you gonna knock on the door?

Laura tries to make herself, but can't.

STICK MAN (CONT'D)

Come on, please just knock on the door? It's not hard. Just a little...tap tap. It's all in the wrist, really. I would do it if I could. See? I'm trying. Is that doing anything at all?

The Stick Man shakes his arm back and forth on the door.

LAURA

Shut up. I'll do it.

She hesitates one more time, then knocks.

Stick Man gives her a "thumbs up."

The front door opens. It's answered by MRS. FEATHERS (50s, frazzled, and who had attended the funeral earlier).

Upon seeing Laura, Mrs. Feathers freezes up, speechless.

MRS. FEATHERS

Oh.

An awkward moment follows. Neither knows what to say.

LAURA

Is Nelly here?

MRS. FEATHERS

Nelly's...studying...

LAURA

That's...that's fine, I don't need to...

She turns half-around, as if preparing to leave. Stick Man emphatically shakes his head at her, and Laura pauses.

LAURA (CONT'D)

Can I just talk to her for a minute?

Mrs. Feathers stares at Laura a moment longer, then dashes back into the house, vanishing somewhere.

Laura shares a glance with Stick Man. He nods reassuringly.

Then Nelly, the crying girl from the funeral, comes to the door. Seeing Laura, she moves closer and throws her arms around her.

Laura shows some warm surprise by the unexpected embrace. But she does not return the hug.

EXT. NELLY'S BACK YARD - DAY

Piles of school textbooks are spread out over the back porch. Nelly sits in the middle of all of them, looking nervous, frazzled and distracted.

Laura stands nearby, looking around sheepishly.

NELLY

Finals week is going to be bad. Really bad. I can't seem to study fast enough. You're not missing too much.

LAURA

Sorry.

NELLY

I got so anxious before last chem lab that I started dry heaving. Of course Amber heard me in the bathroom and told everyone I have an eating disorder, which I *don't*. After that only Robert would sit with me at lunch. Oh, he was asking if I'd heard anything from you. I told him I hadn't. He said he's been trying to get in touch. Are the two of you...?

Laura shrugs.

LAURA

I don't even know.

Beat.

Stick Man appears in Laura's line of sight.

STICK MAN

That's your in. Ask her!

LAURA

What about you and...James?

NELLY

What about us?

LAURA

Were you guys still talking?

NELLY

Kind of.

LAURA

What does "kind of" mean?

NELLY

It means what it means. We say hi to each other at school, and text...*texted*...each other a couple times a week. Mostly stupid memes and jokes we'd find. It's been like a year since we were *really* talking.

LAURA

Since you broke up.

NELLY

Well, I don't call it a "break up."

LAURA
It wasn't not a break up.

NELLY
He didn't call it that, did he?

Laura goes silent.

NELLY (CONT'D)
Anyway, we weren't really ever together. We just got along really - really - well, okay? We hung out a lot...until we didn't. That's all.

There's another pause. Laura looks around. The Stick Man makes an emphatic gesture - "*keep pushing.*"

LAURA
All I know is that James didn't go around kissing a lot of people. You might not have thought you were important to him, but you were.

Nelly throws her a sharp glance. *Is she asking me if I hurt James?* But she shrugs it off.

NELLY
Laura...I'm not...in the right frame of mind to talk about him right now. And this week...all my time has to go to studying, okay?

LAURA
Did he say anything to you?

NELLY
When?

LAURA
Just before...or did you say anything to him?

NELLY
I told you. We weren't really talking much. Now please. I really can't waste time right now.

LAURA
Waste time? *This* is wasting time? I'm trying to figure out what happened with my brother!

Laura gets herself worked up. She snatches up Nelly's textbook and throws it on the ground.

As Laura almost loses her temper, there's a distant, rumbling sound like thunder. Only Laura and Stick Man can hear it. Stick Man becomes nervous.

STICK MAN

Easy, Laura. Take it easy.

But there are tears in Nelly's eyes.

NELLY

I didn't hurt James, Laura. Okay? I wanted him to be my boyfriend, and for a while I thought he wanted the same thing. But then he would close up...he'd just go so far away sometimes, you know?

LAURA

That's just how James is though.

NELLY

Exactly. That's why, when he stopped texting and talking to me, even though I cried a lot I didn't worry and I didn't ask for a reason. It was just a James thing to do.

Laura calms down, and tears also appear in her eyes.

LAURA

A James thing to do...

NELLY

Then again, what does that even mean? I kept thinking I knew him. I kept thinking that.

Nelly collapses into tears.

Reluctantly Laura moves in and lays a comforting hand on Nelly's back. She picks up the book she'd thrown, and gently hands it back.

Stick Man sits a little ways away, looking despondent and shrugging despite his constant smile.

EXT. SUBURBAN STREET - DAY

Laura bikes back toward home, wearing a stern and angry frown. Her eyes are aimed dead ahead of her.

STICK MAN

Hey! Can you slow down! I am fast,
but not *that* fast! Laura! I need
you so I can get home!

Laura pays no attention to him. The Stick Man, running on the sidewalk, falls behind her, his little voice vanishing into the distance.

Again Laura passes by Robert's house. Robert is no longer mowing the lawn. He's sitting on the curb, apparently waiting for her.

As she passes Robert stands up with a friendly smile, and waves at her.

ROBERT

Laura?

Laura glances at him but decides to ignore him. Her bike speeds on by.

EXT. LAURA'S HOUSE - DAY

Arriving onto her front yard, Laura gets off the bike.

For a moment she stares at her front door. Her breathing is unsteady - she's angry.

Violently she throws the bike down to the ground beside her.

INT. LAURA'S BEDROOM - DAY

On Laura's desk, the sketchbook starts to shake and vibrate threateningly. The thunderous sound is heard again.

EXT. LAURA'S HOUSE - DAY

Laura throws her helmet at the bike as hard as she can, then paces toward the front door, swings it open and storms inside.

INT. LIVING ROOM - DAY

As she storms through the living room, Laura passes Mary, who is sitting idly on the couch watching TV. The chess board is still undisturbed.

Mary looks up from the TV for a moment, lifts her hand in a weak wave, then redirects her attention to the screen.

INT. HALLWAY - DAY

Laura walks past the door to her own room.

She goes right up to James' door, and grabs the doorknob.

Without turning the knob, she thumps her forehead against the door, just over the poster with the Oscar Wilde quote.

She brings her head back, then slams it forward against against the door, gritting her teeth.

Then the Stick Man, sticking to the walls, rushes around the corner out of breath.

STICK MAN

I didn't think I was gonna find you again Laura! You can't leave me behind like that. We need each other.

Laura doesn't pay any attention to him. She continues fiddling with the doorknob. It's turning - not locked. She just doesn't know if she wants to open it.

The Stick Man rushes up toward the sign on the door, until he's standing just beside it, near Laura's head.

STICK MAN (CONT'D)

You can't go in there. Did you read the sign?

LAURA

I know what the sign says. His stupid quotes. Why couldn't he ever just say what he meant?

STICK MAN

Pretty easy to figure out this means "don't come in."

LAURA

He never let me in. He never let anyone in!

STICK MAN

Laura, come on. Deep breaths. I know nothing makes sense right now but we'll keep looking. We'll just figure it out together, okay?

Laura reaches up with both hands and grabs the quote poster, wrinkling and tearing it up in her fists.

There's a rumbling sound from inside Laura's room. It's followed by a loud thumping noise.

Hearing the noise, Laura stops her destruction of the sign and turns her head.

LAURA
What was that?

STICK MAN
Red King...

Trembling, Stick Man moves along the wall slowly back toward Laura's room. Laura lets go of the ruined sign and follows.

INT. LAURA'S BEDROOM - DAY

Laura enters and sees the sketchbook sitting on her desk. It's apparently undisturbed since she left it here.

Stick Man cautiously looks at it from a distance.

STICK MAN
Do you think he got out?

LAURA
I don't know.

Laura walks slowly over to the desk. She reaches out for the sketchbook and picks it up.

STICK MAN
It's awfully quiet. I don't like this at all. If he got out, he could have ended up anywhere.

LAURA
Shhh.

She holds the book up to her ear, listening hard for a tense moment.

But she can't hear anything.

STICK MAN
Anything?

Laura shakes her head, and starts to open the book.

STICK MAN (CONT'D)
Wait what are you doing?

LAURA
He's not in here. I can tell. Somehow he must have figured out a way to...

She opens the book...and...

RED KING

Aaarrgh!

The Red King's face snarls from the page with a loud growling shout, startling both Laura and the Stick Man. He's much larger now - nearly the size of the full page.

Laura drops the book, and the Red King leaps out onto the floor, then scurries up the wall.

STICK MAN

No no no! Why did you open the book?

LAURA

I thought he wasn't there!

STICK MAN

That's how he gets you! He's tricky like that!

From the wall, the Red King looks down at them with a malevolent smile.

RED KING

Ah, liberation! Why don't you join me, Laura? It's wonderful to be free.

Laura stands up, picks up a shoe and hurls it at the Red King on the wall. He dodges the shoe, and increases a little in size.

RED KING (CONT'D)

By all means, remain angry. It will only make me stronger!

STICK MAN

You hear that? Laura, you need to calm down!

RED KING

No, Laura. Being calm is just like a prison of your own making. I don't want you to be hurt or trapped. I want you to be free, like me.

STICK MAN

Don't listen to him! He's your enemy. He wants to destroy all your happiness!

The Red King looks scornfully at Stick Man, but then moves toward the window.

RED KING

I can wait, for I have all the time
in the world. I'll just keep
getting stronger and stronger. When
you're ready, you'll ask for me.
And I'll come find you.

Red King speeds out the open window and disappears outside.

STICK MAN

We have to go after him!

LAURA

What?

STICK MAN

You heard what he said. He's just
going to keep getting more
dangerous. If you don't figure out
a way to stop him right now, then
it's gonna be too late!

Overwhelmed, Laura nods. She grabs the sketchbook and a pencil, and hurries out of her room.

EXT. SUBURBAN STREET - DAY

Laura runs down the street, following the fleeting, flitting image of the Red King traveling along the sidewalk. She's running faster than the Stick Man can keep up.

STICK MAN

Don't wait up for me! You have to
catch him! I'm right behind you!

The Red King looks behind him, sees that Laura is pursuing, and snarls. He turns off the street, following the sidewalk into a public park. Laura pursues.

EXT. PARK - DAY

It's a wooded park, covered in trees that make it feel private and even rural. A small stream or ditch runs through the park, and the sidewalk leads over a little bridge.

Laura chases the Red King along the sidewalk toward the bridge.

The Red King stops at the bridge, and turns around with a snarl.

RED KING
Now I have you.

LAURA
What do you mean?

RED KING
You do remember this place, don't
you?

It's the same park as was featured in the photo of Laura
with James.

Laura pauses and looks around.

She sees JAMES along with herself, a dreamlike apparition.
The kids are standing together and smiling as Thomas takes
their picture.

Laura continues turning around, and sees James sitting by
himself under a tree, reading a book. Laura is climbing in
the tree above him.

She turns her head further, seeing Thomas playing chess with
James as Laura sits nearby looking at her phone.

Finally she turns back around to face the Red King on the
bridge, who is looking even larger - about three feet wide
now.

LAURA
Why did you bring me here?

RED KING
To make you angry.

LAURA
I don't want to be angry.

RED KING
Turn and look around again.

Laura doesn't want to do what he says...but she reluctantly
does.

As she turns around now, she sees the park is completely
empty.

Looking back at the Red King, she grits her teeth. The anger
is coming.

RED KING (CONT'D)
Wasn't it nice once, before it all
went away?
(MORE)

RED KING (CONT'D)
 It's not as if you weren't here
 being a part of it, because you
 were. You didn't ask to lose it.
 You didn't deserve to.

The Red King moves closer, as Laura trembles with anger.

RED KING (CONT'D)
 You're the one who's been wronged.
 And if I were you, I'd be mad as
 hell.

Just then, Stick Man creeps up behind the Red King and bites
 him on the ear.

RED KING (CONT'D)
 Aargh!

STICK MAN
 Now, Laura! Get him now!

Red King spins around and head-butts Stick Man, sending the
 little guy toppling head over heels along the bridge. Stick
 Man seems to fall over the edge of the bridge.

Laura collects herself, breathes deeply once, then runs
 forward, slapping the sketchbook over top of the Red King.

But he's much too big for the book now.

RED KING
 That's not going to work this time!

Laura thinks fast: while she has the Red King pinned down,
 she pulls out her pencil and draws a loop around one of the
 spikes on the Red King's crown, then connects the loop with
 another loop around a post of the bridge's hand rail.

Then she steps back. The Red King tries to rush forward, but
 he's tethered to the bridge by the newly drawn line.

RED KING (CONT'D)
 What...what have you...Ah that's a
 very clever trick! Agh! Come on
 then!

Laura continues to step back away from him. Red King pulls
 against the tether, thrashing and trying to yank free.

A slight movement in the grass catches Laura's eye. The
 Stick Man is climbing up from the ditch below the bridge.

Laura stoops down and puts her hand out. The Stick Man weakly climbs onto her hand.

STICK MAN
Did we...did we win?

LAURA
We won. It's gonna be alright.

RED KING
You can keep avoiding me! You can keep pretending I'm not here! But I am! I always always am! And you'll see how much you need me! It's only a matter of time!

A MAN walking a DOG approaches through the park, coming from the other side of the bridge. They begin to cross.

LAURA
No, wait!

But the man and his dog cross. The man looks at her questioningly, then pulls an earbud from his ear.

DOG WALKER
Sorry?

But as he passes over the bridge, the Red King is no longer there.

Laura looks at her hand, and the Stick Man has vanished too. She's all alone.

LAURA
Nothing. Nevermind.

Slowly she puts her hands in her pockets and walks away, keeping her eyes down so she doesn't see all the places that remind her of James.

INT. LAURA'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

Laying in bed, Laura stares at the ceiling. The room is quiet.

She sits up. Looks around as if expecting to see someone. But there's nobody.

She stands up, walks over to the door.

INT. HALLWAY - NIGHT

Laura tiptoes down the hallway toward James' door.

She knocks softly at the door.

LAURA
Are you in there?

There's only silence from within.

Sadly, Laura turns away from the door. Just then, the figure of the Stick Man slips out from under the door.

STICK MAN
Hey. Sorry. You just woke me up is all. Were you having trouble sleeping again?

LAURA
Can you...can you keep me company?

The Stick Man smiles, and nods.

Laura goes back into her room, and the Stick Man follows.

INT. LAURA'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

Laura falls into bed. The Stick Man climbs onto the head of the bed and rests beside the pillow.

LAURA
James used to read me poetry sometimes. I said I hated it, but it did help me get to sleep. Could you read me poetry?

Stick Man smiles, then begins to recite, as if from memory:

STICK MAN
*I have been one acquainted with the
night.
I have walked out in rain - and
back in rain.
I have outwalked the furthest city
light.
I have looked down the saddest city
lane.
I have passed by the watchman on
his beat
And dropped my eyes, unwilling to
explain.*

Laura breaks in and interrupts.

LAURA
It was never happy poetry, was it?

STICK MAN

I don't know. I guess not. Shall I
continue?

Laura rolls over onto her side, away from the Stick Man, and
stares at the wall grimly.

EXT. HIGH SCHOOL - DAY

Laura arrives on her bike, looking up nervously as she puts
the bike on the rack.

As she walks up the front steps, she pauses a moment as she
sees:

A VISION.

HERSELF, a little younger, sitting on the steps, sobbing.
James walks down the steps, smiles at her and sits beside
her.

The vision ends. Laura snaps out of it. She hesitates, takes
a deep breath, and walks up to the doors.

INT. SCHOOL HALLWAY - DAY

The hallways are empty. Laura moves slowly toward the
Principal's office.

Posted on the bulletin boards are black and white printouts
of James' face, smiling in his school photo: "IN LOVING
MEMORY."

Laura glances at the photos, but looks away.

INT. SCHOOL OFFICE - DAY

Miss Johnson is busy at her desk, pushing stacks of paper
into a briefcase.

Laura appears at the open door, and knocks gently.

LAURA

Miss Johnson?

MISS JOHNSON

Oh my goodness! Laura! I can
honestly say I didn't expect to see
you here this week! Are you
alright?

Stick Man moves into the room via the floor, listening to
the conversation.

LAURA

I'm fine.

MISS JOHNSON

Well, good! I'm glad. Did you stop by to see your friends?

LAURA

Actually I was hoping you had a minute.

MISS JOHNSON

Oh, boy. Right now is a bit crazy...but I'll tell you what. If you don't mind tagging along while I take care of some administrative stuff, I'll be all ears.

STICK MAN

Really? She can't make time for this? *For this?*

LAURA

Well, I was... Okay...

Miss Johnson smiles, stands up, and picks up the briefcase full of papers.

She leaves the room, motioning for Laura to follow her.

INT. SCHOOL HALLWAY - DAY

Laura tags along while Miss Johnson walks down the hallway, slipping pieces of paper into various office door mail slots.

Stick Man walks along beside them, on the floor, listening to the conversation.

MISS JOHNSON

How is everything at home, Laura?

STICK MAN

Generic impersonal questions, here we go.

LAURA

It's...good.

MISS JOHNSON

Must be so difficult. I can't even begin to imagine what your parents must be going through. And you too for that matter!

(MORE)

MISS JOHNSON (CONT'D)
I feel that in times like these,
it's important for families to be
able to spend time together.

STICK MAN
Yeah, sure, take the responsibility
off yourself and shove it on the
family. Real nice, lady.

LAURA
Definitely.

MISS JOHNSON
I can only hope your time away from
school is proving beneficial. You
can use your summer to recuperate,
catch up on what you missed and
maybe sneak in a little extra
studying. James...James would
always show up to the first day of
classes already knowing the
material. *He* knew how to use his
time wisely.

Laura narrows her eyes in disapproval.

At that moment a classroom door opens and students begin to
spill out. More doors open, and more students emerge. In a
moment the whole hallway is crowded and Laura has to push
past people to keep up with Miss Johnson.

Stick Man is nearly stepped on hundreds of times as he
clumsily dodges students and their feet.

MISS JOHNSON (CONT'D)
But what was it you wanted to talk
to me about?

LAURA
Actually...

On her way she passes BRETT (17, a total jock wearing a polo
shirt) and AMBER (17, a "rebel" type).

BRETT
Oh my God. Amber, Laura's here!

AMBER
Laura! I heard you were off the
rest of the term.

LAURA

I am. I'm not really here. Ignore me.

Miss Johnson rolls her eyes at the sound of Brett and Amber. She's clearly not a fan of these kids. She continues passing out her papers, now handing them out to passing TEACHERS.

AMBER

I've been texting you. Have you been getting my texts? Because sometimes my phone will do this thing where it randomly drops my messages and it only seems to happen when it's super important.

LAURA

I've gotten your texts.

AMBER

And? How are you? Are you okay?

LAURA

I wish people would stop asking me that.

BRETT

Don't feel like we're overwhelming you. We'd love to hang out with you, but, like, let us know when you feel like it.

Laura smiles and nods, and moves on down the hallway in pursuit of Miss Johnson.

AMBER

I'll call you. I'm done after today. Party!

As Laura continues down the hall, she passes by Robert. She freezes awkwardly when he stops to talk to her.

ROBERT

Hi.

LAURA

Hi.

ROBERT

I...I didn't want to bother you before.

LAURA

I'm just here to...

Beat. They stare at each other for a moment.

Beth runs past, tapping Robert on the shoulder.

BETH

Robert, mom told me to tell you to meet her for lunch after her next class... Oh, hi Laura.

She speaks to Laura with a condescending show of pity. Robert nods to her, and Beth walks away.

ROBERT

Anyway. Can we talk, sometime?

LAURA

I'm meeting with Miss Johnson right now.

ROBERT

Maybe text me later? I have some new video ideas.

LAURA

Okay.

They smile at each other, then part ways.

Laura catches up with Miss Johnson.

LAURA

Okay. I'm here Miss Johnson.

MISS JOHNSON

Oh, so you're finished talking with your friends?

LAURA

What?

MISS JOHNSON

"A bore is someone who deprives you of solitude without providing you with company." That's Oscar Wilde. James loved that quote and knew how to be particular in the friends he chose.

LAURA

James didn't really have friends.

MISS JOHNSON

More accurately, he chose to use his time wisely.

LAURA

I'm not here to talk to you about my friends. I need to ask what the hell happened with James' grades.

Miss Johnson stops and turns around.

MISS JOHNSON

His what?

LAURA

He told me he was flunking eleventh grade. I didn't really believe him at first.

MISS JOHNSON

I'm not at liberty to talk about other students and their grades.

LAURA

Give me a freaking break. This is James we're talking about. Like, the best student in the school apparently. What happened with him?

Miss Johnson pauses for a moment, becoming thoughtful.

The crowd of students thins out, as they go back into the classrooms for the next period.

MISS JOHNSON

I'm going to grab a bite at the cafeteria before the students raid it for lunch. You're welcome to join me.

Miss Johnson walks off. Laura watches after her and narrows her eyes suspiciously.

INT. SCHOOL CAFETERIA - DAY

Miss Johnson sits down with a tray heaped high with carbs and sugar. She starts to dig in, and Laura sits down beside her. Stick Man climbs up onto the table too.

The cafeteria is mostly quiet and empty.

Miss Johnson maintains a constant friendly, bubbly persona.

MISS JOHNSON

I forgot to pack my own lunch. There's just too much on my mind right now.

(MORE)

MISS JOHNSON (CONT'D)
That can't be a good sign for the
rest of the week, can it?

LAURA
We were talking about James.

Miss Johnson takes a long slurp of a milkshake through a
straw.

MISS JOHNSON
James. Yes.

LAURA
Was he really failing?

MISS JOHNSON
It was a funny thing, really. None
of the teachers knew what to think.
James never performed poorly
before. Ever. It took us all by
surprise.

Laura sits patiently while Miss Johnson stuffs her face with
a massive bite of a donut.

MISS JOHNSON (CONT'D)
I'm so sorry. I stress eat.

LAURA
Why were his grades so bad?

MISS JOHNSON
Well that's the question we had. It
started at the beginning of the
term, in August. Mr. Martinez first
brought it to my attention, and
then Mrs. Opal. They didn't know
what to do. It was like he stopped
trying. He seemed the same as
always - quiet, but he was always
quiet, and in him that was a good
quality. I wondered if something
had changed in his...in his family
life.

LAURA
Nothing changed in his family
life...

MISS JOHNSON

All the same, I had to make sure.
Sometimes kids...go through
things...and they bottle it up, and
the only cry for help they feel
they can make is through their
academic performance.

STICK MAN

That's some bullshit amateur
psychology. Is that what they teach
in principal school?

LAURA

Hey. No. No. This is why I'm here
talking to you. Nothing happened at
home.

MISS JOHNSON

Oh, I'm not saying it did.

LAURA

Whatever happened, whatever made
him change, it must have happened
here at school.

MISS JOHNSON

If you would be patient and let me
finish...I'm getting to that.

STICK MAN

Getting to what?

LAURA

Getting to what?

Finally showing a little impatience, Miss Johnson pulls out
her phone, and opens up a video file. She sets the phone on
the table for Laura to see.

MISS JOHNSON

I asked your parents here for a
meeting last Fall. I wanted to feel
out why James' grades were
suffering and whether his home life
was to blame.

She hits PLAY on the video. It shows Thomas, Mary, James and
Miss Johnson sitting together in a classroom.

LAURA

Why didn't I know this meeting
happened?

MISS JOHNSON
 It's confidential between the
 student and the parents.
 Technically I shouldn't be showing
 it to you.

Laura focuses, her eyes growing sad as she watching the
 image of James in the video...

PHONE VIDEO: INT. CLASSROOM - NIGHT

Miss Johnson sits at the head table, while James, Mary and
 Thomas sit at desks together.

The video is taken by a phone, sitting on the desk.

MARY
 I had no idea this was happening.
 James, what's going on?

MISS JOHNSON
 To be clear, this meeting is not
 meant to be seen in a disciplinary
 light. James has always been a
 model student.

THOMAS
 See? I told you it was just going
 to be about grades.

MISS JOHNSON
 Usually a question of grades
 wouldn't be a reason for concern,
 but James is a special case.

THOMAS
 You hear that buddy? Special case.
 That's not a bad thing, right?

MISS JOHNSON
 I would like for James to talk to
 us all about his current experience
 at home and at school. James? If
 it's alright with you.

James sits up straight and smiles.

JAMES
 Yeah. It's definitely alright. Um,
 I guess I just haven't been trying
 as hard, this year.

(MORE)

JAMES (CONT'D)

Um, mom says I make school look easy - dad likes to point to my good grades to try and get Laura to study, but school isn't easy for me either. I just always worked really hard, and this year I guess I'm reading more books I want to read, and I'm listening to more music, and I'm just not trying as hard to do well here, at school.

Thomas puts an understanding hand on James' shoulder.

MISS JOHNSON

And is there any particular reason you can point to?

JAMES

What do you mean?

MISS JOHNSON

Is something distracting you? Is anything bothering you that you'd like to talk about?

MARY

Oh, my God. She's trying to blame us.

THOMAS

What?

MISS JOHNSON

No, that's not what I'm saying...

JAMES

Oh...is it...no! Haha. Seriously. Everything is...great. I literally just haven't been...haven't had my head in the game.

MISS JOHNSON

And what about your classes? Your teachers have been treating you alright? You're not having any issues with fellow students?

JAMES

No. No. Miss Johnson, I love being here. And I'm getting a lot out of my classes, and I don't have a problem with anybody. I'm serious.

(MORE)

JAMES (CONT'D)

I just let myself get distracted more than usual, but not by anything bad, really.

MISS JOHNSON

We just want you back, James. You've always been top of your class and we're all looking forward to seeing your name on those lists again.

THOMAS

Wait. Is this...is this actually about James, or is it about the school needing to meet certain academic standards? Because I don't think you'd go through all this trouble for the well-being of a student...

INT. SCHOOL CAFETERIA - DAY

Miss Johnson abruptly stops the video and puts the phone away.

Stick Man seems lost in thought, sitting at the edge of the table sad and confused.

Laura tries to control her emotions.

MISS JOHNSON

That's the best answer I can give you, Laura, because I was asking the exact same question you are.

LAURA

Except...he never started doing better, did he?

Miss Johnson shakes her head sadly.

MISS JOHNSON

But every time I spoke with him he was very, very positive and bright. I couldn't have known that... It was such a shock when...

Miss Johnson has to pause to wipe a tear from her eye.

MISS JOHNSON (CONT'D)

You said he mentioned his grades to you. How did he seem?

LAURA

He, uh...he acted like he wasn't concerned.

Miss Johnson's defenses have crumbled, and she actually begins to cry.

MISS JOHNSON

That's how he acted with me too. I kept asking him over and over again how he was doing, if he was okay. He just smiled. And he said...he said "I hear life gets harder after graduation. So why rush it?" And he laughed, just like he always did.

Laura frowns. To her surprise, Miss Johnson wraps an arm around her shoulders. Laura, unmoved by Miss Johnson's show of emotion, reluctantly returns the side-hug.

A few students enter the cafeteria and start piling food onto trays. Immediately Miss Johnson pulls away from Laura and wipes the tears from her eyes.

EXT. SCHOOL FRONT STEPS - DAY

Laura sits on the steps outside the school. No one else is around. She stares down at the ground, hopelessly.

Stick Man sits on the step beside her.

STICK MAN

I thought for sure you were gonna find what you were looking for in there. It was a good lead, though.

Laura just shrugs.

They both seem despondent and lost for words for a long moment.

LAURA

Last time I sat here, I wasn't happy either. But then there wasn't a good reason, except that I was a freshman and the whole world was overwhelming and confusing and terrible. Usual high school stuff, I guess.

STICK MAN

I remember that.

LAURA

How?

Stick Man shrugs.

STICK MAN

Because you do. I also remember he walked down the steps, and sat next to you. Kinda like this.

Laura turns to look at Stick Man, who has grown to be life size, projected onto the wall and steps so he almost looks like James, sitting beside Laura.

LAURA

Do you remember what he said?

Stick Man's voice reverts to James' normal speaking voice.

STICK MAN

Hey, Laura. I almost just asked you why you were crying, but then I realized that's a stupid question. I think I've figured out that our natural response to - well pretty much anything at all - is to want to cry. The good news is; it doesn't stay that way. Eventually you stop crying, you take a deep breath and look around and realize that things aren't so bad. They really never were. And I think that every time you stop being sad, the good parts of life get better and better. I promise you're going to like the next few years here.

As the Stick Man speaks, Laura has a vision of James himself sitting beside her, saying the same thing.

When he finishes, he becomes the Stick Man again, and returns to his normal, tiny size.

Laura smiles bitterly at the memory.

LAURA

He was happy, here.

STICK MAN

Pardon?

LAURA

School wasn't the problem. I think Miss Johnson was right.

STICK MAN
Right about what?

Laura glares ahead, anger furrowing her forehead. She stands up and descends the steps, going back toward her bicycle.

STICK MAN (CONT'D)
Right about what??

INT. LIVING ROOM - DAY

The door slams open and shut. Laura storms inside, the bicycle helmet still on her head.

Mary is sitting in an armchair, flipping aimlessly through the pages of a fashion magazine.

LAURA
Mom.

Mary looks up, as if coming out of a daze. Laura sits in the couch across from her.

LAURA (CONT'D)
We never talked about James.

MARY
About James?

There's a tense, silent moment. Laura's lips quiver.

LAURA
You were always...you were a bitch to him.

Mary, with eerie calmness, sets aside the magazine and keeps her eyes trained on Laura.

LAURA (CONT'D)
You never...tried to understand him, and you were always angry with him...

MARY
(*coldly*)
I was not always angry with him.

LAURA
Any time he got excited about something you shut down and you wouldn't talk to him.

MARY

We were very different people.
We've always known that.

LAURA

And when he was upset, the one
thing he knew was that he couldn't
come to you with his problems.

MARY

If he had opened up to me about
anything, I would have listened.

LAURA

Living with you was like some sort
of strict training in bottling up
his emotions.

Mary is beginning to crack, beginning to grow disturbed by
the conversation.

MARY

You weren't around for the early
years of his life so you wouldn't
know how I tried to get through to
him.

LAURA

Maybe if only he'd just felt
comfortable at home, then he would
have maintained healthy
relationships and done better at
school and everything...

MARY

Laura!

Mary's outburst catches Laura off guard. Her anger is a
cold, terrifying eruption.

MARY (CONT'D)

Don't speak to me like this! He was
my son! Do you think I liked being
left out of that...that bond he
shared with your father? I never
had that with anyone, not even with
you. Do you think I liked the way
they both lived in their own little
world and judged everybody else
like we were lesser humans somehow?
We just weren't observant like
them. I wasn't empathetic enough.

(MORE)

MARY (CONT'D)

And you, you were never good enough
because you weren't *smart* like
James. He never let us in. But we
tried, Laura. We tried!

Mary stands up and moves toward Laura.

Distressed, Laura backs away, then turns to flee toward the
bedrooms.

LAURA

But I don't think you really did
try, mom. You really didn't try at
all!

INT. LAURA'S BEDROOM - DAY

Laura slams the door shut behind her, then sits down on the
bed, putting her head into her hands.

There's a knock at the door. The knock is urgently repeated.

LAURA

No. Go away.

The knocking stops. Soft footsteps are heard heading away.

Laura hears rustling, and looks down at her pillow:

Stick Man wriggles his way out from under the pillow,
dragging the ENVELOPE out with him.

STICK MAN

Phew. Moving real-life objects uses
up a lot of energy.

LAURA

What are you doing?

STICK MAN

It's time, I think.

He motions toward the envelope.

LAURA

No.

STICK MAN

You haven't found any answers out
there. Maybe they've been right
here.

LAURA

No.

STICK MAN

What? Why not? What are you afraid of?

LAURA

I think whatever's in there is just going to be the thing that helps the Red King win once and for all.

STICK MAN

But he's stuck now, remember? What can he do from out there?

LAURA

Everything, if I read that letter.

Stick Man seems to have a realization. A look of disbelief comes over his smiling face.

STICK MAN

Oh...no. You're not afraid of him. You're afraid of...me.

LAURA

What?

STICK MAN

Because I'm going to get to the bottom of this, no matter what. I'm going to find out why the thing that happened happened, even if you don't really want to know.

LAURA

Why wouldn't I want to know?

STICK MAN

Because you might not like the answer!

Beat.

STICK MAN (CONT'D)

Did you try, really? Or were you just like mom?

LAURA

Shut up.

STICK MAN

She was right about one thing. He lived in his own little world. But you never really tried to reach in, even though he opened the door over and over again!

Laura swats at the Stick Man. He dodges out of the way.

She swats again. As he avoids her hand, he slips and falls off the bed, landing on the floor.

Laura stands up and flees the room.

INT. LIVING ROOM - DAY

Laura rushes into the living room, where she overlooks the unfinished chess game.

A tear runs down her face.

Stick Man slowly walks down the hallway behind her.

STICK MAN

You never did really know him. Otherwise you wouldn't be trying so hard to figure out what happened. But, Laura...the answer's been right under our noses. Well...your nose. I don't have one.

Laura tries to turn around and run away from him again, but Stick Man has grown in size. He has no trouble staying in front of her. He stands on a wall and faces her down.

LAURA

No.

STICK MAN

He put so much of his energy into making other people, like you, feel better about themselves, but those other people never bothered to do the same for him!

LAURA

You're wrong! You're wrong!

She swings at the Stick Man, punching the wall where his face appears to be.

She withdraws her hand and both listen as a thunderous sound rumbles in the distance.

Then Laura turns and flees out the front door, slamming the door before Stick Man can get out to follow her.

EXT. LAURA'S HOUSE - DAY

Laura is still wearing the bicycle helmet.

As she slams the door and runs into her driveway, Laura doesn't bother to look up and see the CAR pulling in.

Blind with tears of anger, Laura nearly runs right into the hood of the car just as it hits the brakes.

The car stops just in time for Laura to see it. She panics and jumps back, barely scraping her elbow on the hood. She falls back and her helmeted head hits the cement.

THOMAS

Laura!

Thomas jumps out of his driver seat and runs to where Laura is lying on the ground.

THOMAS (CONT'D)

Laura, oh my God. You came out of the house so fast. I tried to stop. I tried to stop. Are you okay?

Laura is fully crying now. She curls into a fetal position on the ground.

LAURA

It's my fault, dad. It's my fault.

THOMAS

No, I should have been paying closer attention. Are you hurt? Let me see. I can call an ambulance if you are...

LAURA

No. James. It's my fault.

Thomas realizes what Laura is saying, and grief fills his eyes. He leans down and holds Laura close.

THOMAS

Laura. No. No. It's not. It's not.

EXT. SUBURBAN STREET - DAY

Thomas walks alongside Laura down the street. Both have calmed down a little bit now.

Stick Man is following at a distance.

THOMAS

Your mom hasn't been answering the phone, but I had to come back to get some files for work. I was kind of hoping I could sneak in and out without anyone noticing me.

LAURA

Why?

THOMAS

Just so things could stay sort of calm, for now.

LAURA

They haven't been.

Thomas looks up into the distance, guilt in his eyes.

They turn off the street into the park with the bridge.

EXT. PARK - DAY

They walk alongside one another for a another long moment in silence.

THOMAS

I wish I knew the best thing to do right now. It seems like, as a dad, as a husband, I'm supposed to know that stuff. But I don't.

LAURA

At least one thing's easy for you.

THOMAS

What's that?

LAURA

You don't need to feel guilty.

THOMAS

Guilty? Of course I...

He sees the grief reappearing in Laura's eyes. He stops walking, stoops to her level and puts his hands on her shoulders.

THOMAS (CONT'D)

Laura. Everyone who knew him feels guilty right now. Especially us. Of course we do.

(MORE)

THOMAS (CONT'D)

But that doesn't mean...that
doesn't mean...

LAURA

But we made him feel alone. All of
us did, except for you, maybe. If I
saw him smiling, I never bothered
to ask him if he meant it or not.

Thomas sighs. Seeing a bench nearby, he leads Laura to it
and sits beside her.

THOMAS

We look for reasons for why things
happen. We have to look, because
our brains like to solve problems,
like math, or chess. And if we can
find out why something bad
happened, we can learn not to let
it happen again. But people aren't
math problems, or chess pieces.
There are a hundred reasons why
unhappiness like that can happen,
but there's also no reason at all.
Me...you're right...I was...am...a
lot like James. It's easy to feel
alone, no matter how many people
are around. And it's easy to feel
like every minute of living is
just...hard work...and it would be
easier to stop. And maybe we think
sometimes it would get easier if
someone reached in and gave us a
helping hand. But then someone
does, and we're just as lonely as
we were before. So we keep on
smiling, so we can be alone without
bothering anybody else.

Laura looks up at Thomas, whose own eyes are grim, hardened,
emotionless. But after he finishes he turns to look at her,
and tears spring to his eyes.

THOMAS (CONT'D)

But none of us *didn't* try. I don't
know a single person who wasn't
good to James. In the end, that's
all anybody can hope for. You need
to stop looking for reasons, Laura.
It's not your fault. "Fault" isn't
even a word that applies here.

Laura sniffs, and looks down at the ground.

The Stick Man is there on the sidewalk, but he's tiny now, smaller than a thumbnail. He's trying to talk to Laura, but his voice is so quiet it's unintelligible.

Laura turns to look back at her father.

LAURA

So...how am I supposed to...feel?

THOMAS

That's a...that's quite a question. How do we feel when we lose anyone we love? Whatever we need to feel, we'll feel. But don't... don't stop living your own life, okay?

Laura nods with some uncertainty.

LAURA

I haven't been texting my friends back. I guess I felt like I would be a jerk for hanging out with them.

THOMAS

You should text them back if you want to. I don't think that'll make you a jerk.

Again Laura nods. But then she looks at Thomas earnestly.

LAURA

Dad...are you okay?

THOMAS

I'll get there, Laura. Yeah. I'll get there.

LAURA

Want to go get lunch?

Thomas wipes tears from his eyes and nods.

They stand up and walk away from the bench.

The tiny Stick Man shouts after them in a tiny voice. We move closer to him until we can hear what he's saying:

STICK MAN

Laura! Listen to me! You've got to be careful! He's gone! Look at the bridge! You got too angry and the Red King got away!

He chases after Laura, but he's so tiny that keeping up is difficult.

Sure enough, the bridge is empty. There's no sign of the Red King.

INT. ROBERT'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

Robert sits at a desk. He is on his laptop, working on an ANIMATION VIDEO.

His cell phone buzzes beside him. There's a TEXT from Laura:

"HI ROBERT. DO YOU WANT TO HANG OUT AND TALK?"

Robert sees the text and reaches excitedly for the phone.

He begins to reply to the text, then changes his mind, and jumps out of his chair, running to the door of his room.

INT. ROBERT'S LIVING ROOM - DAY

The house is furnished with religious imagery: this is clearly a Christian household.

Robert runs toward a TREADMILL, where his mother April is working up a sweat.

ROBERT

Mom. Can I go hang out with Laura?

APRIL

Do you have time for that? You should be studying, shouldn't you?

Robert glances over toward the couch, where Beth is pouring through a textbook.

ROBERT

I'll do better if I don't overstudy.

APRIL

Well. You can invite her here. I don't want you going out and staying up too late.

ROBERT

Okay. Thanks mom.

Robert runs back toward his room, texting as he goes.

EXT. SUBURBAN STREET - EVENING

Laura rides her bike down the road again. She stares straight ahead thoughtfully, but then breathes deeply and shakes her head.

LAURA

Don't think about it. Don't think about it.

Behind her, the tiny little Stick Man is running along, trying to keep up.

Stick Man pauses and looks around cautiously, listening to the silence, warily expecting to see someone. But there's nothing to see or hear. He continues along in his pursuit.

INT. ROBERT'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

Laura sits in Robert's desk chair, while Robert sits on his bed. There is a long moment of awkward silence.

ROBERT

You can talk to me about James, if you want.

LAURA

I think...instead...what did you want to talk about?

ROBERT

I... I'm glad you liked the video!

LAURA

It was really great. Where did you find the music?

ROBERT

Oh, I composed that too.

LAURA

You did? I didn't know you were so good at that now.

ROBERT

I think if we keep making more videos, we can be a good team.

LAURA

Yeah.

The silence continues again awkwardly.

ROBERT
Are we boyfriend and girlfriend?

LAURA
I don't know.

ROBERT
I think I want to be. Do you?

LAURA
I thought I did. But then...

Robert shrugs helplessly.

ROBERT
I thought I would want to kiss you,
until we were there.

LAURA
You confused me.

ROBERT
I was confused too. This is what I
really wanted to talk about. But
you have to promise not to tell my
mom and dad, or Beth. Okay?

LAURA
Okay.

ROBERT
I was talking with Mr. Martinez,
and then I looked up some stuff
online, and I guess some people
just aren't gay, and they aren't
straight, because they just don't
have any interest in, like,
touching people.

LAURA
Okay...

ROBERT
I think I might be asexual.

LAURA
Why don't you want your parents to
know about that?

ROBERT
It's not normal.

Beat.

LAURA

I don't know what "normal" means anymore.

ROBERT

I still want to be your boyfriend though. I know that sounds weird, and you can think about it. I know you have a lot going on right now.

LAURA

I will think about it. I do...like you...I guess.

There's a knock at the door. It's Robert's father Donald.

DONALD (O.S.)

Robert. It's time for dinner.

ROBERT

Oh, um...is it okay if Laura stays?

DONALD (O.S.)

Ask your mother.

Robert smiles at Laura.

INT. ROBERT'S DINING ROOM - NIGHT

Robert enters the dining room, followed by Laura. Donald, April and Beth are already seated.

APRIL

Hello Laura.

DONALD

Hello Laura.

LAURA

Hi.

DONALD

It's good to see that you're out and about. You know. After everything.

Beat. Laura looks at the plate of food that's been set out for her.

LAURA

Thanks, Mr. and Mrs. Opal. This is nice.

Trying to lessen the tension, she reaches for her fork.

APRIL
Let's say grace, first.

Laura nods. Everyone else at the table crosses themselves in unison.

APRIL, DONALD, ROBERT, BETH
Bless us our Lord, and these thy
gifts which we are about to receive
from thy bounty.

APRIL
And may God bless and give comfort
to Laura and the whole - the
Highland family.

ALL
Amen.

They start to dig in.

APRIL
So. Progress report?

BETH
I felt okay about my history
multiple choice quiz yesterday...

APRIL
Okay?

BETH
But I nailed the essay portion.
Definitely.

APRIL
And you already...

BETH
Already got back my grades from
Algebra and English, so as long as
I ace my bio exam tomorrow...

APRIL
And you will.

BETH
And I will...I should come out with
at least A-minus.

DONALD
That's good!

APRIL
And Robert?

ROBERT
Same. A-minus I think.

APRIL
You don't know that because you
still have biology and music
history tomorrow.

ROBERT
I'll do alright.

APRIL
Alright?

ROBERT
Good. I promise.

Donald pats Robert on the back. April looks at Laura and smiles.

APRIL
I'm sorry Laura. This is something
we do, because we hold each other
to very high standards in this
house. I'm sure it's the last thing
you want to hear about.

LAURA
It's okay. I actually kind of think
it might have been better for me to
stay in school, for the
distraction.

APRIL
Not for the...academics?

LAURA
What?

APRIL
I don't think school should ever be
considered a distraction from
anything, and if it is, then maybe
you're studying for the wrong
reasons.

ROBERT
You know what she meant, mom.

DONALD
Don't talk back to your mother.

APRIL

I'm sure you're going to be in my English class next term.

LAURA

I'm guessing so, yeah.

APRIL

Well, after having taught your brother, I have high, high hopes that you'll prove yourself. You'll come back from break a stronger student than ever.

Laura grits her teeth a moment. The sound of thunder rumbles in the distance as she gets angry.

BETH

I think Laura would do way better if she would stop hanging out with Brett and Amber and all them.

APRIL

The company we keep is extremely important. Without breaking any confidentiality I'll just say I've had both of them in my class...and that's all I'll say.

ROBERT

I don't know. They're both nice.

Beat.

LAURA

They are nice.

DONALD

I wonder if it makes much of a difference in young people, if there's an inverse ratio between time spent with friends and the quality of grades. Say, take a kid like James, her brother, who I only ever saw by himself. But, I hear his grades were fantastic.

Everyone at the table looks at Donald like he's an idiot.

BETH

I have plenty of friends. Not everybody has to be a geek to be smart, dad.

Thunder rumbles. Laura glares over at Beth. Robert quickly interjects.

ROBERT

Not that James was a geek. James was really really cool.

Beth shrugs.

APRIL

Maybe...maybe we shouldn't talk about James so much.

LAURA

It's okay. I think the more I remember him, the longer I sort of keep him alive in my mind. I want to keep him there, since it's the only place he is anymore.

Uncomfortable pause.

BETH

Well. You know he's *somewhere*, right?

All heads turn toward Beth.

BETH (CONT'D)

I mean, I get you might not be religious so you might not know how that works.

APRIL

Beth...

BETH

Yeah. Sorry.

LAURA

How *what* works?

ROBERT

Um. Can you please pass the butter?

BETH

This is not meant to be in any way disrespectful or offensive. It just makes me irritated when people say things like "oh he was so wonderful" and "such a great, cool guy" when he literally went and threw that all away.

(MORE)

BETH (CONT'D)

Not to mention, he wasn't supposed to even get a real funeral.

Laura's glare turns grimmer and grimmer.

EXT. ROBERT'S HOUSE - NIGHT

The thundering sound grows louder. The earth starts to shake.

Little Stick Man, standing just outside the house, looks around, terrified.

STICK MAN

Oh. Oh no. No no no. This is bad bad bad bad bad...Laura! Help!

The shaking of the earth jostles and tosses the Stick Man around helplessly.

Then in the distance, from down the street, appears a Red figure so large he takes up the whole width of the road.

The Red King laughs with a deep, booming voice. His smile is big and cruel.

INT. ROBERT'S DINING ROOM - NIGHT

DONALD

There's not really any direct Biblical evidence that, um...that...

April gives Donald a "shut-up" stare.

BETH

We don't need biblical evidence when we have logic. It's a mortal sin. He made his choice, and there's no way to repent of that. So he's definitely in hell.

The whole table falls silent. Laura is red in the face, far beyond speechless.

ROBERT

Are we going to have...dessert tonight?

LAURA

James...is in hell?

Beth has realized she went too far, and she sheepishly looks away.

LAURA (CONT'D)

Beth. Look at me, and tell me again
that James is in hell.

Laura stands up in her chair, threateningly.

Thunder sounds grow louder and the house starts to shake.

Beth looks up at Laura. She starts to move her mouth, but hesitates...

But nothing needs be said.

A WINDOW shatters, and the Red King bursts into the house, so large that it takes a moment for him to spill into the room via the walls.

The walls turn red, the color of the massive Red King.

POV: from Beth's perspective, it looks like The Red King is "standing" behind Laura, immense and smiling hungrily.

Then the Red King charges forward.

EXT. ROBERT'S HOUSE - NIGHT

Stick Man freezes in fear. He covers his ears at the sounds of dishes breaking, girls screaming and the Red King growling.

INT. ROBERT'S DINING ROOM - NIGHT

Laura watches with disbelief as the Red King seems to attack Beth, sending the other girl sprawling to the floor.

CUT to see Laura herself kneeling over Beth, screaming at the top of her lungs and actively beating on Beth, while April and Robert try to pull her back.

APRIL

Laura! Get off my daughter this
instant!

ROBERT

Come on, Laura. Come on!

They finally succeeds in pulling Laura back.

Beth, blood coming out of her nose, looks up with wide eyes.

BETH

Okay. I shouldn't have said anything.

Then Laura turns away in a rage, and storms out of the house.

EXT. ROBERT'S HOUSE - NIGHT

Stick Man covers his ears and trembles as the front door opens and slams shut

Laura storms out. As she walks down the sidewalk to the road the massive figure of the Red King travels just underneath her, spreading out at least ten feet on either side of her.

EXT. SUBURBAN STREET - NIGHT

Laura rides her bike. Her teeth are grit and her glare is angry. Her helmet is not on.

Bird's-eye-view shows the Red King moving directly below her and with her, equaling her speed. His voice booms.

RED KING

I told you. I told you this time would come, when you would finally decide you needed me, and me alone.

INT. LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

The front door slams open. Laura bursts into the house, switches on the light, and screams at the top of her lungs.

She runs toward the bedrooms, and the Red King follows.

INT. HALLWAY - NIGHT

Laura rushes toward James' room, tears the sign off the door, and bursts into the room.

INT. JAMES' ROOM - NIGHT

Laura bursts in and stands in the middle of the room as the Red King fills the walls around her.

Red King ROARS and starts to dash around the room, destroying everything in his path.

LAURA

Your life was perfect! You had no reason to throw it all away like you did! How dare you?!

The Red King's destruction is INTERCUT with:

Laura smashing everything in the room. There's no sign of the Red King.

INT. HALLWAY - NIGHT

Mary walks out of her bedroom. She hears the screaming and crashing. Tears begin to pour down her face.

Laura runs out of James' room, right past Mary without paying any attention to her.

INT. LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

Finally, Laura storms into the living room, stares at the chess set for a moment...

Red King appears behind her on the wall with a huge, snarling smile.

RED KING

We don't have to play anymore if
you don't want to.

Then Laura KICKS the chess board, scattering the pieces all over the floor.

She pauses, breathing heavily as she overlooks the destruction.

Mary slowly emerges into the room. Crying, she watches Laura.

MARY

Laura...

Laura whips around. She and her mother stare at each other for a moment. Laura narrows her eyes and whirls away toward the kitchen.

INT. KITCHEN - NIGHT

Opening the refrigerator, Laura reaches for the six-pack of BEER. She grabs it without a second thought, and walks away.

INT. LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

Laura storms right past her mother.

LAURA

I won't be back tonight.

Laura goes out the front door and slams it behind her.

Mary collapses to the floor in tears.

EXT. SUBURBAN STREET - NIGHT

Laura walks away from her house, six-pack in hand.

She pulls out her cell phone and dials a number.

LAURA

Hey, Amber. You're done with
finals, right? I got some beer.

Behind her, two figures emerge from the house: the giant Red King and the tiny Stick Man.

Both of them are breathing heavily, exhausted. Both of them look at Laura with concern, then they share a glance before following her down the street.

EXT. ABANDONED WAREHOUSE - NIGHT

Laura and Amber clink their beers together.

They're sitting in a dimly-lit rundown area.

AMBER

Hell yeah.

LAURA

It's my dad's beer. But he's not
gonna miss it.

AMBER

You could have asked if you wanted
to drink. Brett's older brother is
always buying it for us.

LAURA

Brett's coming, right?

Another figure appears coming in from the darkness.

BRETT

Did I hear my name?

AMBER

You know you're gonna fail your
tests tomorrow if you get drunk.

BRETT

You think I'm a lightweight? She
thinks I'm a lightweight.

Amber nods toward a second six-pack that Brett has brought with him.

AMBER

That's four beers for each of us
and there's no way in hell I'm
drinking all four of mine.

BRETT

More for me! Cheers.

He cracks open his beer, and clinks it against Amber's and Laura's.

LAURA

Friggin' cheers.

BRETT

But seriously. I was actually gonna
kind of get some sleep and study,
but who am I kidding. When I heard
Laura wanted to hang out...I wasn't
gonna miss that.

LAURA

Aw, you're blowing off your grades
for little old me?

BRETT

If you can skip finals week and
still be fine, I figure school
can't be all that important.

LAURA

Well, friggin' cheers to that.

The three of them drink deeply.

Laura sputters and coughs a little, and the others giggle.

AMBER

We need some music.

Amber sets her phone down, pop music playing at full volume.

Stick Man, about as tiny as a dime, watches from the ground nearby, a concerned look on his face.

STICK MAN

Laura. Hey Laura. What are you
doing? This isn't helping anything.
Come on. Why don't you go home? Get
a good night sleep and come back to
everything in the morning.

The Red King is on a wall nearby, frowning.

Laura glances at both of them. She hears them, but she chooses to ignore them.

TIME PASSES

The three friends drink more and more. The world blurs.

AMBER

I just gotta say...I feel so, so bad because we're all out here living like life is normal, but it's different for you.

LAURA

How is it different for me? How is anything different for me?

AMBER

It just...really really sucks about James. It royally sucks.

Laura finishes her bottle.

LAURA

Let's not talk about that. He was an asshole.

AMBER

I'm sorry, anyway.

LAURA

Don't be. I think it might be better.

Amber and Brett look at her with some concern.

Red King, meanwhile, continues to grow in size. He's nearly as big as the whole warehouse.

Stick Man stares up in wonder and fear at how big Red King has grown. But Red King is frowning. He addresses Stick Man.

RED KING

I did not think what would happen once I grew so, so powerful. But now I'm lonely, and I'm afraid, because there's nothing else for me to do but exist, and become less powerful.

Sure enough, he begins to shrink in size as Laura drinks.

TIME PASSES

Amber has passed out against the wall, a half-drunk bottle of beer in her hand.

Brett has one arm around Laura, while holding a beer bottle in the other hand.

BRETT

So what's up with you and Robert, anyway?

LAURA

He's sweet. We make videos together.

BRETT

Videos?

LAURA

Animated...cartoon stuff.

BRETT

Haha. He's so weird.

LAURA

I draw for the videos.

BRETT

That's cool that you draw. All I mean is that I was always surprised you liked Robert. He's like, shy, and preppy, and...did you ever find out if he's secretly gay?

Laura shrugs.

LAURA

I don't wanna talk about him.

BRETT

Cool.

Brett leans in and kisses Laura, and she lets him.

Red King rapidly shrinks in size, looking despondent.

Laura and Brett alternate making out and drinking beer, while the music continues playing from Amber's phone.

EXT. ABANDONED WAREHOUSE - MORNING

All three youngsters lie on the ground. Beer bottles are scattered around them.

Amber wakes up first.

 AMBER
 Shit.

She grabs Brett and shakes him.

 AMBER (CONT'D)
 Brett. Brett!

Brett opens his eyes.

 BRETT
 Huh?

 AMBER
 It's like...eight o'clock.

 BRETT
 Shit. Is today Friday?

Amber nods.

 AMBER
 I've gotta go home before dad
 notices I'm not there.

 BRETT
 I'm so dead if I miss the test!

Brett stands up and holds his head. He stumbles away.

Amber looks down at Laura. Gently she reaches down and gives her a little shake.

Laura stirs a little. Half-awake, she waves a dismissive hand at Amber.

Amber shrugs, picks up her phone, and walks away after Brett.

A few long moments pass.

Laura opens her eyes. She sits up. Looks around.

There are only beer bottles scattered around. Everything else is silent.

The silence goes on. Laura wipes her eyes. She reaches for a beer can, then drops it.

She wraps her arms around her own shoulders. It's cold. She breathes with a shiver.

She hears a tiny voice beside her. She turns to look.

Both Red King and Stick Man are on the ground nearby. Both are so tiny they can barely be seen. They both look exhausted.

Laura leans down, resting herself on the ground so she can hear what they're saying.

STICK MAN
Are you okay?

Laura looks at him but doesn't answer.

STICK MAN (CONT'D)
Maybe we were on the wrong track. I
guess sometimes people just
feel...empty.

Laura glances over at the Red King. He too looks helpless and despondent.

Laura stands up, picks up the beer bottles and places them back in the cardboard cases, and walks away.

INT. LIVING ROOM - DAY

Laura, hair a mess and clothes filthy, walks into the house with the empty beer bottles in her hands.

Thomas and Mary both stand up in the living room and rush toward her.

THOMAS
Laura! Mary called me and I went
out looking for you...

MARY
I'm so glad you're back...where did
you go?

Thomas sees the empty beer bottles. He reaches out and takes them from her.

THOMAS
It doesn't matter where you went.
You're back. And you're okay.
Right? You're okay?

In spite of herself, Laura leans forward and gives Thomas a hug.

Mary watches, with tears in her eyes.

LAURA
I don't know. I don't know
anything.

THOMAS
Who does?

Laura pulls away and walks toward her room.

MARY
What do you need from us, Laura?
What can we do?

Laura pauses and thinks for a moment.

LAURA
Don't do anything for me. Figure
out what you need to do, and do it.

She turns away and walks toward her room. But she stops
again for one final thought.

LAURA (CONT'D)
Mom, I think you need both me and
dad. And I need both of you. Things
don't get better when you break
stuff apart.

Laura leaves the room.

Thomas and Mary look at each other.

MARY
Do you...want to go for a walk with
me?

Thomas nods.

INT. LAURA'S BEDROOM - DAY

Laura sits on her bed, holding the letter from James in her
hands.

On either side of her, the Stick Man and Red King watch
eagerly.

STICK MAN
I thought you were afraid of
opening it.

RED KING
Why should she be afraid? Truths
are to be found in there. Open the
letter.

LAURA
And what if it makes me angry
again?

RED KING
All the better.

STICK MAN
Don't listen to him. Maybe instead
of making you angry, it'll finally
give you some sort of
justification. A real reason.

RED KING
She doesn't need reasons! Don't you
remember? Reasons are imagined.
Anger is the only thing that's
real.

STICK MAN
She already tried that! It worked
out so well for all of us!

RED KING
You need to be quiet!

Red King moves threateningly toward Stick Man.

LAURA
You need to stop fighting!

Both cartoon figures pause and look at Laura.

LAURA (CONT'D)
You two...you haven't learned
anything. I'm not reading this
letter until we can all get along,
so we can agree on how we're going
to act when we finally do read it.

RED KING
And how will we ever come to such
an agreement?

STICK MAN
Like *that's* ever gonna happen.

LAURA
I can think of a way.

INT. LIVING ROOM - DAY

Laura kneels over the chess set. She picks up all the pieces
and organizes them.

The two little figures watch curiously.

Laura shuts her eyes, trying to recall the game...

INSERTS - quick flashes of the original game, with James sitting across from her.

JAMES (V.O.)

You never know until it's done. But we don't have to play anymore if you don't want to.

LAURA

I do. I do want to play.

Laura plays through the game move by move. Occasionally she does a double-take and corrects herself.

Finally the pieces are all in place.

She takes a moment to study the board, making sure everything is in place.

She points at the empty space on the red side, and addresses the Red King.

LAURA

You. You're there.

The Red King reluctantly steps into place on the square.

STICK MAN

I don't...I don't understand what you're doing.

LAURA

You two are going to play against each other. You're going to finish the game.

RED KING

But it was never *our* game to play.

LAURA

I was, though. This is why you're both here. And whoever wins...you get to stay.

Stick Man and Red King share a nervous glance. Neither are very happy about the arrangement.

LAURA (CONT'D)

We have to finish the game.

Stick Man finally holds out his tiny hand.

Laura rubs her finger over the floor, as if to shake his hand.

STICK MAN

If those are the rules...those are
the rules.

Laura looks at Red King. He nods in reluctant agreement.

RED KING

If there is to be war...then let
the war commence!

Laura looks at Stick Man.

LAURA

It was...our turn.

Stick Man looks over the board, considering. Then he points out a move, and Laura makes it.

Red King grimaces, and points out a move. Laura moves the piece.

Stick Man grunts, and points again. Laura moves a piece.

Red King growls. Laura moves again.

Back and forth. Laura moves pieces for them, as the two focus intensely on the board.

Red King gets cruelly excited with each move. He laughs.

White pieces begin to be taken, removed from the board.

Stick Man scratches his head and begins to act frightened.

Laura contemplates the board. Her eyes are narrowed. She's very focused on the outcome.

FANTASTICAL ILLUSTRATED WORLD

The scene shifts to one in Laura's imagination:

A fully-formed Red King, life-size, plays chess against the full-size Stick Man.

The illustrated figure of Laura, as seen in the pages of the sketchbook, watches from a distance.

Red King laughs with glee after each move, and looks threateningly at his opponent.

Stick Man seems to grow more and more unsure of himself.

As Red King wins the game and the number of white pieces diminishes, thunder rumbles and the sky grows dark with illustrated rain clouds.

Little illustrated Laura (as seen in the sketchbook) walks closer to the board.

Her focus intensifies. She looks back and forth from player to player.

STICK MAN

I can...I can still turn this around.

RED KING

I'm the Red King. I am anger. You will fight against me, but your fighting will only make you weaker until you can not fight at all.

LAURA

No.

Both players turn to look at Laura.

LAURA (CONT'D)

No.

INT. LIVING ROOM - DAY

Back in the "real life" setting, Laura looks over the board.

She reaches out for the White King, grabbing it with two fingers.

LAURA

I don't have to fight you.

RED KING & STICK MAN

What?

LAURA

I've been fighting so hard, but I'm not going to anymore.

STICK MAN

What are...you're just going to let us lose?

RED KING

No...you have to fight! I need you to fight!

She looks up from the board, and sees a vision of JAMES sitting across from her.

LAURA

The fact is, I'm always going to wonder if things could have been different, and I'm always going to be mad at you. But that's okay. I don't have to fight against it anymore.

She sets down the White King, a sign of surrender.

The fall of the White King makes a thunderous sound.

All the visions vanish. There is no James, there's no Stick Man and there's no Red King.

The front door of the house clicks open. Mary and Thomas walk inside, and stop in surprise when they see Laura.

LAURA

I just had to finish our chess game.

Thomas nods in understanding.

Laura glances down, and sees that Mary and Thomas are holding each others' hands tightly.

EXT. PARK - DAY

Laura sits alone on the park bench. Mary and Thomas sit alongside her.

She slowly slips her fingernail under the seal of the envelope, and tears it open.

She pulls out the letter and starts to read it.

JAMES (V.O.)

Dear Laura. First of all, I guess I should apologize about this. Partly because I know it hurts you, and dad, and mom, but especially because there's never been a way to help you, or anybody else really understand the way I can feel about things, and sometimes being confused is even worse than being hurt.

(MORE)

JAMES (CONT'D)

All I want is for you all to understand, but then again the only way someone could understand is if they're hurting too, and I don't want that for anyone. I don't want that for you, because I love you. That's not really a thing I ever said very much, but it's true. You're the best sister I could have ever asked for, and I always, always was happy around you. When you look back and think about me, don't think about someone who is sad, or mad, or confused. Think about this happy little stick man I drew for you, because this is really how I feel whenever I think about you. This is me now. This is me forever. Love, James.

At the bottom of the letter is an illustration: a roughly-drawn image of James. He's in the same style as the Red King, but he's also a stick man. He's smiling.

Laura reads the letter and tears pour down her eyes.

The Red King and Stick Man appear. They look at one another and nod.

Both figures climb into the letter, where they merge together with the new picture.

The new stick man moves very slightly, its smile growing a little wider. Then it's still.

Laura folds the letter shut and holds it to her chest.

EXT. ROBERT'S HOUSE - DAY

Laura walks up to the front door and knocks.

The door is answered by Beth. Her face is a little bruised, but she seems fine.

BETH

Hey.

LAURA

Hey.

They look at each other for an awkward moment.

BETH

I, uh, I convinced my mom not to get you expelled or anything. Because I guess I was being kind of an asshole.

LAURA

I'm sorry I hit you. I was being an asshole too.

BETH

I'll go get Robert.

Beth turns around, but Robert has already appeared behind her. He's got a smile on his face.

EXT. SUBURBAN STREET - DAY

Robert and Laura walk alongside each other.

ROBERT

I doubt you've really been able to think about what we talked about. And...I totally understand if you're...weirded out by it. I guess I'm just...weird.

LAURA

You're not like most other kids. But that doesn't mean you're weird.

ROBERT

Brett said it does. And so did Amber. And I know they're your friends.

Laura shrugs.

LAURA

It doesn't matter. They can be jerks. We're all weird in different ways. And no matter what...here, look at me.

She pauses, and makes eye contact with Robert.

LAURA (CONT'D)

No matter what, you don't ever need to be weird alone. You can talk to me about anything, any time.

Robert nods, still a little bit downcast.

As they continue walking, Laura reaches for his hand.

LAURA (CONT'D)

But I was thinking about it, and I think I do want us to be boyfriend and girlfriend.

ROBERT

Even if I don't want to kiss?

LAURA

Maybe kissing is overrated.

They walk together in silence for a moment. Robert is beaming.

ROBERT

But maybe I can try again sometime. Try...you know...liking it.

LAURA

I wouldn't complain about that. Here. I want to show you a new character I drew. Maybe he can show up in our next video.

They continue on down the street.

INT. JAMES' ROOM - DAY

Laura, Mary and Thomas all work to pack up James' belongings into cardboard boxes and plastic bags.

MARY

Remember, boxes are for goodwill, bags are for trash.

THOMAS

I still haven't put a single thing into the trash bag.

MARY

He's got so many of his old shirts, and pants with holes in the knees...goodwill won't want those.

LAURA

People pay money for pants with holes in the knees.

MARY

Goodwill, then.

Thomas starts going through a stack of books.

THOMAS

Oh, it's the book of poetry we got
him...we got him for his tenth...

Thomas' eyes well up with tears.

He coughs the tears away.

THOMAS (CONT'D)

I'm gonna...I'm gonna go get us
some sandwiches. You guys want
anything?

MARY

I'll go with you, actually. I need
some fresh air. Laura? Sandwich?

LAURA

I'll get whatever you get. But no
pickles or olives.

Mary and Thomas nod, and leave the room.

Laura spends a few more moments folding James' clothes and
putting them in boxes.

Then she digs into one of his clothing drawers.

She feels something at the bottom of the drawer, beneath the
shirts.

She reaches down and grabs something.

It's the actual red king CHESS PIECE.

She looks at it for a moment, trying to comprehend why it
might be here.

LAURA

Did he...did he...

All at once, the NEW STICK MAN appears beside her.

NEW STICK MAN

I really gotcha, didn't I? And you
thought I'd really just lose my
most important chess piece!

Laura starts to laugh as she looks at the chess piece.

She holds it tightly, close to her chest, as she laughs and
laughs.

THE END