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Examining Mental Illness in Young Adult Literature: Sick-Lit, Authenticity, and Reader
Influence

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Content Warning: This thesis contains topics related to mental illness such as: anxiety, depression, suicide, bullying, and sexual assault.

Part I: Critical Analysis

It's clear that young adult (YA) literature aims to connect with youth through relatable and authentic narratives. Common topics of young adult novels include escape narratives involving magic or fantasy, to ultra-realistic works about common problems or challenges. Though these topics are still popular in the young adult genre, more recent novels attempt to capture young people's experiences with mental illness such as depression, anxiety, and obsessive-compulsive disorder. Due to an increasing awareness of mental health issues in adolescent development, narratives about mental illness have been prevalent in the 21st century with novels like my primary texts *13 Reasons Why* by Jay Asher, *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* by Stephen Chbosky and many others. Canonized novels like *The Bell Jar* by Sylvia Plath depict this issue as it was thought of in the 1950s, but modern authors approach the topic in more dramatized and controversial ways. With the growing popularity of mental health narratives and on-screen adaptations, they are categorized into their own subgenres, one notably called "sick-lit."

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, mental health concerns are on the rise in young people, especially in the past year. They state that children in the United States are most commonly diagnosed with ADHD, behavior problems, anxiety, and depression.

- 7.4% of children aged 3-17 years (approximately 4.5 million) have a diagnosed behavior problem.
- 7.1% of children aged 3-17 years (approximately 4.4 million) have diagnosed anxiety.
- 3.2% of children aged 3-17 years (approximately 1.9 million) have diagnosed depression.

(Centers for Disease Control and Prevention).

With these statistics growing each year, it becomes increasingly important for young people to receive proper help from professionals, peers, or educators. Given the coronavirus pandemic's negative influence on mental health, conversation around this healthcare has increased in an attempt to break down societal stigmas. Although great strides have been made toward normalizing mental illness, American pop culture still has a long way to go in terms of accurately portraying these kinds of narratives.

For this thesis, it's important to reflect on the history of mental health texts and how they've evolved into twentieth century literature and culture. This research has influenced the decisions and writing strategies I include in my original fiction, "Mural of Moons."

One of the popular sub-genres of mental health narratives, "teen sick-lit" is recognized by writer Julie Passanante Elman. In her article "Nothing Feels as Real: Teen Sick-Lit, Sadness, and the Condition of Adolescence," she reflects on the genre as it emerged in the 1970s "in response to Post 1960 liberal social movements in post-Fordist economic shifts toward service industries that commodified emotion" (175). Although this term is not widely used, Elman's definition is applicable given the subject matter of the narratives it describes.

In meaning, this term echoes popular genres described in the industry such as "chick-lit" or the movie equivalent "chick-flicks." Though these labels reflect a marketing strategy used to generalize, they are problematic. Sick-lit is especially sensitive because it implies that characters coping with mental or physical illness can be curated for audience enjoyment. As explained in criticism of *Thirteen Reasons Why* the term also evokes romanticizing serious topics within the narrative. By generalizing the severity of these topics, audiences may read or watch narratives about mental illness for entertainment rather than education. Though not all young adult fiction

has to be educational, mental illness is a topic that needs proper attention and research to portray it accurately.

Elman defines sick-lit as “a genre of adolescent fiction that fused illness and romance narrative to reinforce the interdependent norms of able-bodiedness, heteronormativity, emotional management, and maturity among American youth” (175). In other words, heteronormality is most often accepted while those who are mentally ill or struggling are stereotyped as an “other.” This concept is seen in Jay Asher’s *Thirteen Reasons Why* through protagonist Hannah Baker. She narrates the story through pre-recorded audio tapes after her suicide, and consistently categorizes herself as the “other” in comparison to her classmates who bullied and deceived her when she was alive. Asher’s approach to the narrative follows Elman’s definition of sick-lit because the character who is struggling the most believes she is an outcast, therefore reinforcing the idea of her classmates being normal. This storyline also creates a potentially negative message for young adult readers. By presenting a character who needs help but rather embraces an assumed otherness, readers may believe that they too should take revenge or fall victim to harassment and bullying.

Another popular novel that follows Elman’s interpretation is *The Fault in Our Stars* by John Green. Main characters Hazel Grace and Augustus Waters both live with cancer, making their love story more passionate and unique since their futures aren’t guaranteed. The societal fascination with illness or traumatic narratives has continued with many other novels throughout the 20th century and into the 21st like *Five Feet Apart* by Rachael Lippincott, *Me Before You* by JoJo Moyes, and *Me and Earl and the Dying Girl* by Jesse Andrews. Not only are these kinds of narratives popular as literature, they are frequently adapted into movies or TV shows making them accessible to widespread audiences.

As more narratives emerge that attempt to portray mental or physical illness, it's easier to categorize and analyze them as they fit into the genre of young adult fiction or sick-lit. For example, in a study done by Diane Scrofano, "Disability Narrative Theory and Young Adult Fiction of Mental Illness" she examines a large sample of mental health narratives from the 20th and 21st century and places them into three categories based on disability narrative theory created by Arthur Frank. In order to shift a trend of mental health narratives, she suggests the need for a specific type of story called the "quest narrative" since "the disabled person is managing his or her symptoms in a healthy way and living to his or her fullest potential" (1). She states that many stories fall into the "chaos narrative" which "focuses on a period of time in which the disabled persons symptoms cause significant disruption in his or her life" (1).

She concludes that there are more chaos narratives than quest narratives published in the 20th and 21st century, which is potentially troubling. She notes that "library staff members and educators should show students not only the suffering that mental illness entails but also the process of recovery and the wondrous meaningful lives that are possible for people with mental illness" (27). Her analysis is important to consider because given the trend of how narratives like these are typically written, readers are more likely to be exposed to stories and characters that are not empowering.

Thinking about how cultural understanding of mental health can shift as a result of these narratives, Julianne Elman questions the perception of "'normal' teen subjectivity as angst-ridden, of disability as tragic, or of 'coming of age' as a gradual rehabilitative process of emotional restraint?" (178). With many young adult narratives including intense topics and characters, the now normalized depiction of young people in media often include tragic and emotional upbringings. In regard to my primary texts, protagonists Hannah Baker in *13 Reasons*

Why and Charlie Kelmeckis in *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* are examples of teens who keep their true emotions hidden as a result of trauma or other life altering events. Elman argues that by presenting characters with emotional distress and confusion all the time, it ultimately distorts the general understanding of teenagers and their experiences.

When done effectively, literature and visual media have the power to connect with readers who are struggling, in a positive way. But unfortunately, they can also generalize and depict stories that are not entirely inclusive or authentic to how teenagers really think. Elman also touches on how these types of narratives often craft characters in a stereotyped image of what is expected of teenagers:

“teen sick-lit has been key to maintaining an image of always-already sad teenagers in opposition to ‘happy’ children and emotionally ‘stable’ adults. Training teenagers ‘how to feel’ within problem novels increasingly had ramifications for advising teenagers ‘how to deal’ with their emotions” (179).

To counteract this trend in my short story, I developed mentally well characters who are close to the mentally unwell protagonist. Though I intended to create a clear emotional distinction between them, I attempted to give my protagonist more moments of happiness where he feels less alienated from hetero-normal characters around him. Since my short story is narrated through the eyes of my protagonist, he tends to place himself in comparison with others. However, his perception of others are not as judgmental as he believes.

Overall, the influence of young adult novels in the sick-lit genre deserve more scrutiny. Given the heightened attention to diagnosis and treatment today, more young people struggle with mental health concerns more than ever before. Many live with mental illness for different reasons, and often people seek comfort from the media or literary entertainment industry to help

them cope. This thesis will bring attention to how literature influences young and vulnerable audiences, consider what it takes to craft an authentic narrative, as well as provide original fiction that addresses mental illness while attempting to steer clear of the pitfalls of sick-lit as it has evolved.

I will analyze the novels *13 Reasons Why* by Jay Asher and *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* by Stephen Chbosky because they have gained popular attention among readers for their depictions of characters who are impacted by trauma and mental illness. Especially noticed for their film and television adaptations, these narratives address mental illness in juxtaposing ways. Chbosky's novel is a stronger example of evoking difficult realizations about anxiety, depression and trauma, while Asher's novel presents more concern for character authenticity and romanticizing suicide. However, they are of particular interest to my research because of authorial choices for narrative voice and character development, as well as audience reception as a result of their popularity.

Stephen Chbosky's *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* has remained immensely popular since its publication in 1999, especially when it was adapted to film in 2012. Since then, the narrative continues to be widely praised for its authentic portrayal of a young man living with symptoms of PTSD as a result of sexual assault. I will analyze the novel's success through its epistolary format, honest characters, and the role others play in the protagonist's development and confrontation of past trauma. The 15-year-old protagonist Charlie Kelmeckis narrates the story by addressing letters to an unnamed friend about his day-to-day life. As the narrative develops, his relationship to friends and family become more important as he encounters situations that make him question his mental well-being.

The epistolary format acts as a powerful tool in establishing emotional intimacy and trust between Charlie and readers. In his first letter, Charlie's vulnerability and innocence are clear when he states "So, this is my life. And I want you to know that I am both happy and sad and I'm still trying to figure out how that could be" (2). Charlie shares that his letters have been prompted by his friend Michael's suicide, indicating that Charlie is going through an emotionally stressful time. The language in his first letter creates a foundation of friendship and honesty needed to establish him as an authentic narrator. It's clear that these letters are not only for the unnamed friend, but for Charlie to contemplate the complexities of his life. Additionally, he signs all of his letters with "Love Always, Charlie" which further prove his kindness.

By writing from a first-person epistolary perspective, Chbosky creates the interesting effect that Charlie is talking directly to readers, especially since there are no return letters from the addressee. Charlie confides to his friend and as time passes, he includes the truth even if it's not pleasant or depicts him poorly. This aspect of honesty and vulnerability is especially important in mental health narratives because it's easy for readers to discredit or question a narrator who is established as being mentally unwell. For example, a famous short story "The Yellow Wallpaper" by Charlotte Gilman Perkins includes a mentally ill woman who is constantly discredited by her husband and doctors. Not being allowed to read, write, or leave her home, she narrates the story, but readers are encouraged to question her reliability.

So, although Stephen Chbosky's choice to write in the first person follows a trend of other mental health narratives, it's ultimately successful because readers are likely to emotionally connect with a protagonist who is honest with themselves. Overall, a strength of the epistolary format allows readers to get a first-hand look into Charlie's thoughts and experiences, while sometimes understanding his trauma before he does.

Charlie's awareness of his mental illness isn't at the foreground of his writing, but subtle details invite readers to notice it early on. To craft this effect, Chbosky approaches this novel with an appropriate balance between experience and thought. Charlie writes about his experiences while also allowing space to contemplate them. His troubling experiences aren't obvious to him, so the nature of his writing is naïve. He describes stressful events as they happen but doesn't realize their influence until others point it out. As readers we witness Charlie's response to his experiences on his own time and are encouraged to feel stronger sympathy when he finally realizes the extent of his mental distress. One moment where this idea is apparent is when Charlie contemplates his friends ignoring him:

I'd do anything not to be this way. I'd do anything to make it up to everyone. And to not have to see a psychiatrist who explains to me about being "passive aggressive" and to not have to take the medicine he gives me which is too expensive for my dad and to not have to talk about bad memories with him. (139)

In a moment of honesty and struggle, readers are encouraged to have compassion for Charlie when he wishes for his mind to be different. I believe that this aspect of Charlie's character is what makes the novel most impactful. By being fully vulnerable to himself and others, Charlie's experiences are believable and evoke emotional reaction from readers. Additionally, the narration of his own life events follow Scrofano's definition of a quest narrative. Though Charlie actively struggles, he also seeks professional help and support from the people around him. Considering how he struggles to cope with stressful situations early in the narrative, his recovery process is more impactful.

Not only has the novel been popular among youth readers, it has also received praise from critics. In the article, "Evaluating Representations of Mental Health in Young Adult

Fiction” by Alison Monaghan, she explores *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* and suggests specific criteria that the narrative follows that has led to its success. One of the criteria she includes is that “The protagonist’s/narrator’s illness experiences allow the reader to draw parallels between her life and experiences and those represented in the narrative” (39). This interpretation is evident with Charlie’s musings of everyday life as a high school student, the varying relationships he has, and small but impactful events that make him emotional. Since it seems like he addresses readers, his stream of thoughts and questions urge to make connection. For example, Charlie writes that “I don’t know if you’ve ever felt like that. That you wanted to sleep for a thousand years. Or just not exist. Or just not be aware that you exist. Or something like that” (94). The novel discusses widespread themes about family and growing up, which has the potential to connect with diverse readers.

Additionally, Monaghan analyzes the importance of Charlie’s relationships to others. This is important because his response to trauma is often seen in his need for maintaining friendships and familial connection. There are many instances where this happens, but one of the most prominent is when Charlie describes his friend Patrick being upset. Charlie writes that he “...moved in to kiss me again. And I just let him. I don't know why. We stayed in his car for a long time. We didn't do anything other than kiss [...] And I just let him. Because that's what friends are for” (160-161). He experiences things that leave him feeling overwhelmed and out of control, but he defers his own safety to make others feel better. In response to hearing this, his friend Sam tells Charlie that “You can’t just sit there and put everybody’s lives ahead of yours and think that counts as love” (200). Sam encourages Charlie to ask for what he wants, which leads to them engaging in consensual sexual interaction. When this happens, Charlie is emotionally triggered by being touched. Although Sam helps Charlie address how his identity as

a passive “wallflower” can be harmful to his well-being, their interaction also makes Charlie realize he was molested as a child.

His lack of action in stressful situations is understood best when readers discover the sexual assault he experienced from his Aunt Helen when he was younger. Charlie is described as a wallflower because he “sees things” “keeps quiet” and “understands” (37) which is the only thing he could do after being molested as a child. The trauma he internalized when he was little carries over into his experiences with Sam, Patrick, and others. His habit of silence is at first recognized and admired by friends, but it’s also a behavior that deepens his trauma.

Charlie’s relationships ultimately constitute a positive driving force for his self-discovery and healing. According to most sick-lit narratives, mentally unwell protagonists are often seen as outsiders. However, Charlie’s strong friendships and familial support counteracts this trend. Additionally, the novel spends time following a chaos narrative, as well as a quest narrative since Charlie is seen both struggling and seeking help for his mental well-being. This dynamic is important because it’s when Charlie spends time away from others that he struggles most. For example, when his friends ignore Charlie after he kisses Sam rather than his girlfriend in a game of truth or dare, his mental state gets worse. During this time, he admits that “I don’t know how much longer I can keep going without friends. I used to be able to do it very easily, but that was before I knew what having a friend was like” (144). It’s clear that Charlie relies on others for support and distraction, so while he is forced to spend time alone his emotional struggles become more apparent.

Overall, the most important writing strategy I believe is responsible for the novel’s success is the epistolary format. Charlie’s letters supply a “third space” in the novel which presents complex characters and the troubling experiences they have growing up in Pennsylvania

in the 1990s. The concept of the “third space” is advanced in Jean Webb’s article, “Narrative Matters: ‘The Third Space’ in Adolescent and Young Adult Fiction.” She defines it as a tactic, character, or other technique that depict ideas or events that are challenging to convey through traditional scene. In the case of *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, Charlie’s letters act as a third space to portray difficult topics in a way that moves beyond standard narrative.

Another example of a text that uses a third space as a literary device is David Long’s short story “Morphine” published in *The New Yorker* in 1998. The story follows a doctor who is addicted to morphine, causing him to act out and lie to his family. He regularly writes in a journal to tell the truth to readers, which also functions as a narrative third space in the story. It’s important for my research to examine not only novels, but short stories as well to provide a framework for my original fiction. The use of journal entries in this story provides a specific narrative voice that creates division between private thought and public life of the doctor. This text, though not technically young adult fiction, is a strong model for the narrative techniques I applied to my original fiction.

Ultimately, *The Perks of Being A Wallflower* utilizes many strategies that create an effective narrative. Most notable are the epistolary format, honest protagonist, and positive relationships. These ideas are of interest to my thesis because given the challenge of portraying a narrative with difficult topics, it’s important that I take note of the successes of this popular text. For my short story I utilize a journal as a third space to depict a protagonist with new founded anxiety and depression. As Charlie’s letters act as a third space, he connects with readers through direct narration on the page and with other characters. It also keeps his character humanized and encourages readers to sympathize for his past while also hoping for a better future.

Another novel that falls into teen sick-lit is *Thirteen Reasons Why* by Jay Asher. This narrative has become even more popular than Chbosky's in pop culture due to the four-season Netflix adaptation. It has also attracted controversial attention due to the show's romanticized portrayal of suicide as a result of bullying, sexual harassment and sexual assault. Less significant for its discussions of actual mental illnesses, the narrative stands as an example of how teen sick-lit can provoke problematic audience responses. The novel is a negative example for my own fiction because of its potential unsettling messages, problematic behavior, its utilization of minor characters and the complexity of audience response. Overall, I am more interested in how the narrative has influenced its readers in both positive and negative ways, rather than in how it successfully addresses controversial topics.

Similar to *The Perks of Being A Wallflower*, this novel utilizes first person narration from high school student Hannah Baker, as well as her friend Clay Jensen. The third space for storytelling is audio tapes which portrays Hannah's traumatic experiences with sexual assault and bullying, causing her to feel isolated. These events eventually lead to Hannah's suicide which is prefaced at the start of the novel. She leaves audiotapes in the hands of those she blames for her trauma and death. On her first tape she says, "*I'm about to tell you the story of my life. More specifically, why my life ended. And if you're listening to these tapes, you're one of the reasons why*" (7).

Similar to *Perks*, other characters play an important role in Hannah's story like high school classmates and adults who don't offer proper support. Although it's common for young adult novels to omit adult perspectives, the lack of grown up support in the novel emphasizes Hannah's feeling of isolation in such a way that could cause teen readers to distrust the adults who might offer help in their lives. While Hannah is trying to piece herself back together after

being treated poorly by her peers, her teachers and parents fall short of understanding the severity of her mental state. Ultimately, she feels like she cannot reach out to them for help, which amplifies her alienation makes her choose suicide as a way of solving her problems.

Rather than being allies to Hannah, classmates are depicted as the reasons why she decided to commit suicide. Unlike *Perks*, Asher's novel depicts the dangers of high school student life and includes a protagonist who eventually falls victim to bullying. This tactic therefore is potentially harmful to readers because of its suggestion that help for struggling teens is difficult to access. For example, in a final effort to seek help from her guidance counselor Mr. Porter, it's clear that her school has insufficient resources to help Hannah appropriately. In her final tape she states, "*I think I've made myself very clear, but no one's stepping forward to stop me [...] A lot of you cared, just not enough. And that... that is what I needed to find out*" (280). Hannah includes Mr. Porter on her tapes because of his dismissive response to her explanation of sexual assault from student Bryce Walker. Additionally, Hannah rarely mentions her parents in her tapes, signifying that they weren't present in her life enough to know what was happening.

The novel's focus doesn't always land on how Hannah is doing emotionally, but rather the people and events that caused her to feel this way. From these details, Hannah's character isn't someone who doesn't necessarily live with depression or anxiety, but rather someone who has had terrible things happen to her, causing her confidence and trust in others to decline as a result. When narrating the tapes, Hannah describes her life just before committing suicide, so it's evident that her reliability as a narrator may be skewed by suicidal ideation. However, Asher attempts to remedy this unreliability with Clay Jensen's perspective on Hannah's experience as well. Clay feels guilty for Hannah's suicide when he thinks "if I hadn't been so afraid of everyone else, I might have told Hannah that someone cared. And Hannah might still be alive"

(181). Clay provides neutral response to Hannah's situation because he fits into a similar wallflower character like Charlie in *Perks*. He proves to know a lot about the characters Hannah depicts on her tapes without ever being too involved in their lives. Though the narrative is unbalanced with mostly disturbing events, Clay is similar to readers since he too is experiencing the tapes for the first time. Overall, it's interesting to consider how much this narrative is guided by the actions and reactions of others, when there is evidence of mixed reader reception as well in real life.

One of the most important aspects of this narrative is the way audiences have responded to the intense storyline. This is a vital idea to consider for my own creative work since this narrative has caused mixed negative and positivity. Reader response for this novel is explored through the study "A Threat or Just a Book? Analyzing Responses to *Thirteen Reasons Why* in a Discourse Community" completed by Brooklyn Walter and Ashley S. Boyd. This article documents a study involving parents, students, and teachers to analyze their reactions to the novel. The study found that reactions to the narrative were different based on the group of people. For example, parents had more concerns for the possibility of romanticizing suicide since it's aimed at children, whereas some younger people were not fazed by the troubling topics. Based on their reactions, the study concluded that the narrative has intense moments that may not be suited for young audiences, while some think the book offers elements that young people could relate to and feel comforted by. This analysis raises complicated questions about the narrative and reflects on questionable choices by Asher and his protagonist Hannah Baker. Considering this study as a stepping point into the effects of teen suicide, it's also an example of a novel that pushes boundaries of expectations in young adult literature.

In general, crafting a mental health narrative for a young adult reader requires sensitivity to readers' responses and to potential triggers. *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* discusses mental health while balancing troubling and positive experiences, while *13 Reasons Why* is a narrative of consistent harmful events and problematic characters. Therefore, such a narrative accomplishes the opposite of what it intends to: validation for suicide as a result of trauma, and potential skepticism towards seeking help. At the end of the novel, Clay changes for the better because he looks out for another girl named Skye who is experiencing depression, but there is no evidence of other characters learning anything new. If the novel contained moments of hope for Hannah, or someone who was able to successfully recognize her emotional state, then the book would be a more positive and less dangerous example of teen sick-lit.

Considering the different ways my primary texts approach mental health content, there are many challenges to drafting a novel of this nature with the intention to reach younger audiences. To shape the narrative strategies of my own short story, I followed advice from critics in addition to my critical readings of the primary texts. Scholar Anastasia Wickham's article, "It Is All in Your Head: Mental Illness in Young Adult Literature" addresses specific tactics that are often used in successful mental health narratives. When describing the novels *Freaks Like Us* by Neal Shusterman and *Challenger Deep* by Susan Vaught, she writes "The authors of both stories refrain from dehumanizing their characters illustrating that regardless of any labels we all share many common struggles and victories" (11). This concept follows Monaghan's criteria for *Perks* since readers are able to relate to characters' experiences. Wickham advances this analysis by stating that "We see the strength of the protagonist as they guide us through their adventures because we understand their perceptual limitations" (17). Rather than mental illness being a detriment, it can also be a point of strength for a character, thus evoking respect from readers.

Wickham also writes that to avoid falling into stereotypes, an author must aim to make characters understandable and likable. If readers feel an emotional connection to characters with mental illness, they are more likely to believe what they narrate unless otherwise said. A way Wickham recommends accomplishing this effect is when characters “Recognize the unreliability of their own mental states [...] then it is in his assertions of untrustworthiness that allow readers to increase their trust in him” (18). The influence of this effect is powerful because conscious acknowledgement proves a character’s understanding of themselves. This concept is particularly important in my short story because without my protagonist’s self-awareness, his narrative becomes potentially questionable.

It’s clear that my two primary texts approach narration with these ideas in mind, since they execute it in comparable ways. Both are from the first-person perspective of the narrator, with other characters acting as a support or to confirm reliability. In *Thirteen Reasons Why*, Hannah’s perspective is via audio tapes. Readers see her words on the page but can also imagine what it’s like for Clay Jensen to listen to someone who has taken their own life. The tapes allow Hannah to control her story without interruption from others, thus giving readers a uniform perspective. Asher’s choice to include both Hannah and Clay’s perspective is more successful in proving reliability because since Hannah is speaking with suicidal intentions, her version of the story could be thought of as dramatized or inauthentic.

On the other hand, *The Perks of Being A Wallflower* is solely narrated from Charlie. Unlike Asher’s novel, Charlie leaves readers less room to question his authenticity because of his self-recognition. He often mentions his emotional reactions to specific events and eventually starts including details about his past experiences with hospitalization and trauma. Keeping these conclusions in mind, my short story builds on successful elements of these novels like honest

characters, first person narration, and allies. Additionally, I attempt to avoid their downfalls like dangerous themes, consistent negativity, and questionable narration.

Part II: Original Fiction

Mural of Moons

February 16th: Dear Journal,

Coffee stains feel like an aesthetic thing for a writer to experience, right? On paper, teeth, countertops... I can't say I'm a real one at this point considering the only eyes that read my words are my own. It's not like there's anything super interesting in here like Star Wars fan fiction, so I doubt anyone would want to know what I'm thinking. Also, I don't actually like coffee, but I'm sure the baristas would think I'm weird if I ask for a hot chocolate every time I come in here. Besides, drinking coffee seems like a "writer" thing to do, so if I want to be anything like one, I should probably get used to it now. Plus, sitting in this fake leather chair gives me an excuse to get out from the cold and be alone. Like actually alone. Right now, I'm at Ed's in downtown and there's snow falling outside...it looks like someone is shaking powdered sugar over the plaza, each flake landing gently on the pavement. Inside the café it's warm but watching through the frosted windows makes me actually want a hot chocolate. Damn.

Mom and Dad have been asking me what my plans are for this weekend, so I'll have to see what Leo and Alex are up to. I'm sure they'll be on Xbox tonight, but I'd rather not listen to their raging energy through my headphones because I just can't keep up. In the café, it's almost closing time, so there's not many people here. The only things I hear are the quiet clangs of teacups on ceramic dishes and jazz music from the speakers. It's a perfect scene, and since Ed knows I like to sit alone I don't have worry about anyone bothering me. I just don't want to think about anything that could screw up the feeling of right now. Honestly, it's been a while since I've

felt, dare I say, good. Of course, there's good and bad days, but recently the hard ones have been taking me longer to recover from. With school and family and everything, I think I'm just stressed. The only times of relief seem to be when I'm having a good time with Leo and Alex. For now, I'll keep drafting up some short story ideas until Mom or Dad start asking for me... Well I'll go back to pretending I like this dirty bean juice now. ~E

I put my pen down next to my cup on the wooden countertop in front of me, letting the steam from the coffee hit my nose. The mug is only half empty because in reality coffee can give me a headache and make my insides jittery. But the warmth from it reminds me I'm safe. Without moving my head, I can see the twinkling glow of string lights that hang above me. The entire ceiling of the shop is a dark blue mural with yellow abstract paintings of stars flying around bright moons. Being lost in space and silence seems appealing from the beauty of the mural with each figure stuck in its place, free and loved by people like me.

Each time I come to Ed's and look at the mural I try to find something new, like a game. My eyes flit across the ceiling with admiration, and I think about drawing my own version in my journal. The string lights are hung from the ceiling all over the small space, illuminating it with an orange glow. As I look at the lights longer, I remember that Abby has some in her room. I think most girls probably do. At least on television, all girls' rooms look the same with fluffy pillows, tiny lights, and pink walls. But I can't know for sure if television writers actually get it right.

Last year after one of Abby's dance recitals Mom, Dad and Nan brought the family here to have chocolate lava cake, Abby's favorite. Mom had been here for a work lunch once and insisted we go. It was a busy Saturday afternoon, and there was a long line of people around the corner. I remember wanting to leave but Mom made us stay and play charades with each other

while we waited. After we got in, the first thing I could hear was the Radiohead song “Weird Fishes” playing softly from the speakers above, which seemed to melt the stress I didn’t know I had in my shoulders. The chocolate cake was pretty good too, so I figured I could bring Leo and Alex here sometime. At one point that day, the owner Ed came to ask us how the food was, and I told him I appreciated the music. I knew I liked this place then, because anyone who enjoys Radiohead must have something in common with me.

I glance down at my journal which blends in with the dark atmosphere of the café. The cover is worn with a few scratches, but otherwise it’s sturdy. A brown string peeks out from the bottom of the journal, marking the next blank page. I open the book and flip through my charcoal pencil sketches of space, stories, quotes from overheard conversations, and brain dumps of whatever I’m thinking. I usually keep everything I write because sometimes it’s fun to look back and see what kinds of stuff I wrote on a certain day, but other times it really sucks if I read something from a tough time. Like when I’m angry and haven’t talked to anyone, I’ll curse them out on the page. Or when I want to remember a strange dream, it’ll go in the journal too. When my brain isn’t feeling normal, I just write, but sometimes it’s scary looking back at what I was thinking. I figure it’s all part of the process of being an artist of some kind. Someone can’t get to the good stories without getting out all the bad stuff first.

The journal was a sixteenth birthday present back in September from my Nan because I think Dad told her I was spending too much time in my room playing Xbox, and they were probably getting worried about me. So, by the end of my birthday dinner at home, she pulled me aside to give me something she thought I’d like: a black leather lined notebook with smooth egret pages. I didn’t know why she gave it to me in private. What did she think I was going to do

with it? At the time I said thank you and planned to store the journal in a drawer somewhere, but when I opened it later on, I saw a note from her.

To Elliot,

Use this journal to get out all the thoughts I know you have in you. Not all of us are big talkers, but you do have something special to say: to yourself or to others, if you wish. Growing up is tough, but just remember how wonderful you really are, because I sure think you're great!

xoxo Nan

I'm not sure what it was, but seeing her scribbled cursive made me pick up my pen one day and start drawing scribbles in the book. My only other experiences with writing was for essays in school, but playing Xbox gets boring after a while and that day I didn't have much to do. After a while, I filled four pages of random stuff. It was mostly scribbled drawings of monsters I thought of, but surprisingly my mind was full and empty as my hand moved on the page. It was like I turned on autopilot, or if the pen had a mind of its own. Since that first day, I've made it a habit to go back to my journal whenever I need. It's easy for me because there are no rules, and no one else to worry about. I turn to it when I'm having an upsetting day, or if I'm bored, whatever. So far, I've filled the book about halfway, so by my next birthday I can ask Nan for another one.

The snow outside continues to fall and I'm in my usual spot by the window sitting in a comfortable silence. Abby says I like the quiet too much, and she always asks me what I'm thinking about when I'm not talking. I'm clearly not as outgoing as her, but she still insists on trying to drag me out to hang out with her friends or go to school football games. Jazz is still playing from the speakers overhead as I lean against the cushioned chair I'm in. Closing my eyes, I soak in the feeling of stillness.

The silence is cut off when my phone buzzes with a text from Mom:

It's getting late E; you have school tomorrow. I'll come pick you up soon.

I sigh and reply:

Yeah, okay.

Mom and Dad let me come to Ed's whenever I want since it gets me out of the house, but they don't realize why I like it so much. I'm sure they assume that I'm here with Alex and Leo to hang out and talk, when in reality this is the only place where my brain is free to do whatever I want. But they don't ask, so it doesn't matter anyway.

February 28th: Dear Journal,

Another day, another Monday. It's only the morning but I feel like there's nothing going on in my brain right now... nothing. I'm not sure if I need to wake up more or what, but my bed is feeling very comfortable right now! I'm surprised I have enough mental power to even form real thoughts. I tried doing my math homework last night, but I couldn't focus so I ended up just playing Call of Duty with Alex and Leo. It's usually pretty fun, but they kept screaming into their microphones when they messed up which eventually gave me a headache. I played in silence while letting them swear, too tired to tell them to stop. I probably should have gone to bed because they just made me feel worse when they talked about all their friends on the soccer team, and the girls they think are attractive.

Leo also reminded us that on Friday there's a winter dance at school, and I really don't want to go. After a while it seemed like they forgot I was there because they didn't shut up about it for at least thirty minutes. I can probably get out of it by just telling the guys I'm sick or something. But I'm sure Abby will be going with her friends, so she'll try to drag me along. I

wish I wanted to go, because that would make it easier for everyone to stop worrying about what I'm doing. But I don't, so now I'll have to say no to whoever asks me which I also hate doing.

In general, I like dancing, but there will be so many people crammed into the stinky gym talking loud at the same time. Plus, I'll have to wear a buttoned shirt and tie which makes me feel itchy and sweaty. Honestly, I'd rather just go to Ed's again, but if I said that out loud I bet everyone would make me feel weird for always wanting to be by myself. It's hard to explain, but I get so nervous around other people that it's easier for me to be alone. My friends are the only exception because they know me so well, but in front of people who I don't talk to all the time I'm an awkward mess. It seems like there's not many people like me at school, so sometimes I feel abnormal for being anti-social. But, take Stephen King for example, if he didn't spend a lot of time alone writing his novels, then they wouldn't be published for me to enjoy. Plenty of great artists and writers spend most of their time by themselves and look at what they've accomplished... If anything, everyone around me needs to get better at worrying about themselves. Later ~E

I shift my eyes from my journal to my room. My black jackets, vans and Red Bull cans scatter the floor, not leaving much room to walk. Nothing is visible under the mess, which makes my room look a lot smaller than it normally is. Looking at it closely, it's pretty bad now because over the past few weeks I've been too tired to really clean anything. If Mom sees my room, she'll probably freak out and complain about how I never let her help me clean. But if she does get mad, then maybe I'll be grounded and won't have to go to the dance.

“Honey it's almost time for school, come have breakfast!” Mom calls from downstairs. I feel my stomach twist at the thought of getting up, and debate pretending to be asleep. But I force myself out of my safe enclosure of blankets and start pushing through the clothes on the

floor to find something to wear. Feeling guilty about the mess, I try shoving clothes into my closet from the floor, but I eventually give up because the room still doesn't look clean.

After a few minutes of rummaging through clothes I finally decide to wear some dark jeans, my Foals band tee, a sweatshirt and my vans. Once I grab my canvas backpack, I glance in the mirror. My messy dark hair makes me look like I've laid in bed for weeks, with my large curls pointing in every direction. After reading Edgar Allen Poe for my english class last night I didn't have the energy to take a shower, but I realize I don't have the time to fix myself now, so I grab my blue beanie to cover it.

My stomach cramps thinking about being in class and anticipating my teachers calling on me. The only class I actually like is english since I've been getting more into reading lately. But in my other classes I usually never raise my hand, so when I get called on the entire class looks at me like they're waiting for me to stumble on my words or say the wrong answer. Normally, I just scribble in my journal as if I'm writing notes, but my teachers can always tell that I'm not listening. Sometimes I wonder what my classmates really think of me, because I imagine they're judging.

I try to snap myself out of these thoughts as I get into Dad's Toyota Corolla for school. I put my headphones on, but as soon as I do Dad motions for me to take them off.

"Elliot let's all catch up before I drop you off to school, yeah?" he says.

"Good luck trying to get anything interesting out of Elliot this early in the morning," Abby says with a chuckle.

"Abby, hey I'm trying here. Sometimes it feels like I know my work colleagues more than my own kids, is that messed up? Anyway, Elliot what's going on at school for you?"

"Oh, nothing really. I—"

“There’s a school dance this Friday and I’m going; don’t you think Elliot should go too?” interrupts Abby.

“That’s great! You two should definitely go!” I feel Dad’s eyes on me through the rear-view mirror and I don’t look up. The knots in my stomach grow deeper as I sit in silence.

“Maybe, I may have other plans,” I say. Abby faces me from the front seat.

“Elliot come on, this is my senior year and I want to go to at least one dance with my little brother.” Her eyes linger on me for a second with a look of sisterly concern.

“Elliot doesn’t that sound like fun?” Dad says.

His words feed the burning fire in my stomach as I consider what to say. Before I can decide, we stop at the front entrance of school and I open the car door without saying anything.

Behind me I hear Dad say, “Elliot, just think about it, okay? Have a good day you two.” My pace quickens as I walk to the school’s front door, Abby trailing behind me. I put my headphones on over my beanie and turn the music up until everything else is muted.

After school, I sit in my room listening to “Let it Happen” by Tame Impala while sketching an astronaut fighting off a scaly monster with laser beams. The upbeat tempo of the drums makes me nod my head to the music, and I admire my pencil sketch of bloodied flesh flying through the galaxy, drifting into the unknowns of space towards the moon. I’m just starting to enjoy myself when I feel a gentle tap on my shoulder. I turn and quickly take off my headphones while closing the journal in front of me.

“Hello Elliot, I didn’t mean to scare you. I just got done playing bridge and wanted to drop off a shirt Abby asked me to sew. How are you today?” Nan stares at me with sweet wrinkled eyes, her purple purse in hand.

“Uhm, hi Nan. I’m okay. I didn’t know you were coming by today.” While I speak, she takes a quick glance around my room and focuses on my desk.

“Is that the journal I got you for your birthday? Oh, I’m so glad you’re using it honey. What are you working on?” She smiles curiously.

“Nothing really. I just mess around sometimes...Uh, don’t mind the clutter. I’ve just been busy with school and haven’t had time to clean my room.”

“That’s okay sweetie. If you want help with it let me know, I’m happy to come by. But I’m sure you’ll feel a lot better if you have a clean room, hon,” she says. A pang of guilt rises in my chest as I watch her look at the pile of clothes. “Are you doing okay, Elliot?”

For a second I contemplate telling her the truth, but then I say, “Really, I’m okay Nan. School is just stressful sometimes.”

“It seems that way... homework keeps getting tougher for you kids the older I get. Unfortunately, you can’t ignore it, just have to power through. Hey, Abby tells me there’s a dance coming up soon. Maybe you’ll feel better about school if you go.” I sigh and stare at Nan exhaustedly. “I know sweetie, I know. Things aren’t easy for a boy your age. Just know that you can always talk to me if you need, okay?”

“Thanks, Nan. I appreciate it,” I reply. She kisses me on the forehead and places a mint candy on the desk.

“Love you hon.”

“Love you too,” I say. She leaves the room and my mind remains at ease. I turn around in my desk chair to examine the mess, feeling guilty that she saw how dirty it is. After contemplating, I decide to put some clothes in the washing machine hoping Nan’s advice is right. Tame Impala continues to play in my headphones while I push dirty pants and socks into the

laundry hamper. As more clothes leave the carpet, the more sun enters my room and onto the walls. After a while my playlist runs through all its songs and my legs tire from walking up and down the stairs, so I stop for the day. I look at the now partially clean carpet and can't remember the last time my room felt like this. Feeling surprisingly proud of the work I did, I text a photo to Nan. After a few minutes she replies saying that she's proud of me, and I'm content as I go back to drawing.

March 4th: Dear Journal,

Well, big surprise! I got roped into going to the dance. As soon as Abby told Mom about it they both convinced me to go, or rather guilted me into it. I felt really bad and didn't want to disappoint anyone because they seemed so excited about the plans, so I caved. Sometimes it's easier to just say yes and be unhappy than to say no and make other people unhappy. But I've been thinking about it so much the past few days, it's at the point where I feel sick even writing about it now. I don't know why it bothers me so much, but I'm going to take Nan's advice and go to see what happens. Alex and Leo are going to come over and take pictures before we go and they're excited to be around Abby's friends, which will hopefully keep the attention off me.

Maybe it won't be that bad. If they play decent music that'll be one good thing, and it'll be funny to see Alex and Leo try to dance... Maybe I'm just overthinking it, but I can't stop my brain from imagining everything that could go wrong. What if someone spikes the punch bowl and everyone gets sloppy drunk and people throw up everywhere? Or what if Abby forces me to dance and I rip my clothes by accident and Mom gets pissed? Or even what if I have a giant pimple and everyone stares and makes fun of me the whole night? It's too much to think about. I've never been to a dance before, so I don't know what to expect. Hopefully it'll be okay. ~E

On dance night I walk into the gym to see it decorated entirely white and blue, our school colors. A balloon archway stands at the entrance, and the gym is filled with students and teachers talking and on the dancefloor. Even our tiger mascot is by the punch bowl, and I feel bad for whoever is on the inside of the costume tonight. Alex and Leo walk just ahead of me, staring at the decorations like they're in a modern art museum. The gym looks better than it usually does, but somehow the scent of food can't cover the smell of sweaty people from the dance floor. Everywhere I look I see the same faces from the school hallways, just dressed in makeup and nice clothes. Seniors from the baseball team, chess club members, even people from band class came to dance to the DJ's choice of music, "The Cupid Shuffle."

Earlier today, Mom took me to Macy's to help pick out a nice shirt, but she basically picked it for me. The fabric is light blue cotton with a very itchy collar, making it hard to breathe normally. Being in the crowded gym makes it feel even tighter, and I feel cold sweat trickling from my armpits down my ribcage. Also, Mom insisted that she put gel in my hair and style it right before we left, which I never normally do myself. I quickly look at my phone screen and I barely recognize myself. I can't tell if I look nice or weird, but either way I look like a ken doll version of myself. I put my phone away and try not to think about it.

"Hey, let's go check out the food," Alex suggests.

"Dude, we literally just had pizza at Elliot's house...Elliot, wanna go look?" Leo says.

"Yeah, sure," I say. Alex and Leo walk ahead of me to the long table filled with various desserts and drinks. I linger behind them and look up at the disco ball, mesmerized by the twinkling lights. For a second it reminds me of Ed's, and I take a deep breath to calm the nerves manifesting in my sweaty palms.

As Alex and Leo shove chicken nuggets into ranch dressing, I see Abby and her friends on the dance floor from one of the clothed tables we're seated at. Before we left, she was so excited about the light purple dress she picked out since it contrasts with her curled brunette hair. I watch her as she twirls around, the dress following her movements and catching light from the disco ball above. Her friends laugh and dance along with her and I smile. After a moment I think about how she'll be moving away to college soon, far from this stagnant town that I have to stay in and deal with people who don't have anything in common with me for another two years.

Mom and Dad have had their energy focused on Abby and her future, which has gotten them off my back. But I can tell Mom and Dad feel bad that I don't have as much going for me. Like some weekends when Abby goes out with friends and I stay at home, Mom and Dad will try to get me to watch a movie with them and it seems like they're sad I don't have plans. Or when Abby gets amazing grades and they praise her and pretend to be satisfied with my occasional C+ in calculus. They haven't asked about school recently, so they don't know that I'm doing well in english class. It's impossible to live in Abby's shadow because she's better than me with a lot of things and I don't even know who I am.

As I watch her, we make eye contact and she runs towards me with her arms open. "Hey, come dance with me!" she says as she forcefully grabs my hands and drags me to the dance floor. I try to speak but can't find the words, and suddenly I'm engulfed into the mass of moving people in the middle of the gym. All her friends smile as they dance at me, as I awkwardly bounce my legs up and down. The music blares from the speakers and the light from the disco ball shines directly in my eyes. Around me, other students watch as I try desperately to enjoy what's happening, but the more faces I see the harder it is to breathe. Suddenly, Abby shoves me in the middle of the small dancing circle we've made, and I immediately step back.

“Elliot, what’s wrong? Are you having fun?” Abby asks.

“I... uhm. I’m fine. I’m gonna go get air,” I say. I hurtle towards the exit past wildly dancing students and the blinding disco ball. As I walk, thoughts keep flooding in my head, all of them telling me how stupid I look in this shirt and how strange it is that I’m even here. The sweat continues to wet my shirt, so I rush into the bathroom. Two other guys are standing by the sinks. One of them washes his hands while the other takes a puff of an e-cigarette. They look at me strangely and one of them says, “Woah, you look freaked out... Wanna hit this?” I ignore him and open the closest stall, latch it shut then lean against the closed door behind me. From inside the stall I can hear them chuckle, and after a minute they finally leave.

I take a deep breath and close my eyes. Though it’s quiet now, my head is still spinning and I’m frozen in place. All I can do is stand against the stall and breathe. The muffled sound of music drifts in from the gym and I start to worry that Alex and Leo might come looking for me. I take my phone from my pocket and debate calling Mom or Dad, but I don’t know how I would explain myself. Suddenly the corners of the stall cave in towards me and tears stream from my eyes. I don’t expect it to happen, but my breath is hot and heavy at first, with each sob stronger than the last. My chest tightens with sharp pain, then I hear the bathroom door open again. I attempt to stop the cries by wiping my face with crumpled toilet paper and holding my breath, hoping to stay silent.

“Should I ask Maya to dance?” I hear one of them say as the sink turns on. They can’t tell I’m in the stall, so I keep quiet as I dab toilet paper under my arms.

“She’s pretty hot bro, we should ask her and her friends to come back to mine later and we can have a good time,” the other boy says.

“Dude, yes. We can play spin the bottle and mess with it, so it lands on you two every time.” They burst out laughing and I hear them high five. For a moment I forget about Abby pushing me to dance in front of everyone because I’m disgusted by their conversation.

Once they finally leave, my face and under arms are dry enough to go back into dance. As I wash my hands, I’m surprised at how hard I cried. The last time I remember crying like this was when I broke my arm a few years ago, but now it doesn’t matter because it’s been at least fifteen minutes since I left the dance and the guys will wonder where I am.

I make my way back into the gym with slightly swollen eyes and drier arms. Alex and Leo are in the same spot where I left them, somehow still eating food. “How much money would you give me if I asked one of Abby’s friends to slow dance?” Alex asks.

“Uhm, none,” I say. I sit down and check the time. Thankfully, there’s only an hour left before the end of the dance.

“What? They’re all hot seniors and we’re sophomores that no one gives a damn about, I think I deserve something for having the guts to even consider asking one of them,” Alex says. Leo leans over and pinches Alex’s arm. “Okay, *ouch!* What was that for?”

“That’s Elliot’s sister you’re talking about bro. Gross,” Leo says. Alex rubs his arm dramatically, which makes me laugh for the first time all night. I take out my phone and start scrolling through Twitter when I hear the song “Go Your Own Way” by Fleetwood Mac burst through the speakers. “You know this song? Let’s go dance,” Leo says.

“This is like old person music. Who requested this stuff?” Alex says. Leo stares at the dance floor then stands up with determination, motioning me to follow him.

“Abby already made me dance and I felt really stupid, I’m done for the night,” I say.

“Alright, then I’ll just dance around you,” Leo says. He stands behind my chair, aggressively moving his arms like wet noodles. I rest my forehead on the table, not having the energy to watch Leo and potentially freak out again. With his mouth full Alex starts laughing at Leo, and I can tell he starts dancing too. I wait for the song to be over, still not looking up but they keep dancing and making random noises to get my attention. Out of curiosity I eventually lift my head, and seeing their erratic movements make me laugh as well.

For a moment the gym is gone and the only people I see are my friends dancing and laughing together without a care. The longer I watch them, their happiness infects me, and I chuckle while taking photos of them on my phone. When the song is over, they sit down exhaustedly. I look around and see that everyone else at the dance is preoccupied and hadn’t noticed their crazy dancing. For some reason this makes me feel lighter and I continue laughing at Alex and Leo’s tired faces.

March 18th: Dear Journal,

In general, the dance was better than I thought. The only thing is that it took so long for me to actually enjoy everything. After the dance Mom took all of us to get ice cream but I felt so tired that I went right to bed as soon as we got home.

I’ve been thinking more about getting upset in the bathroom, and since then I’ve noticed that my mind can have a lot of different thoughts at once. It usually starts with one bad thing, and I can’t keep it under control no matter what I do. I’ve been comparing myself to other people, especially Abby because it seems like everyone is happy all the time and I’m not. I had an okay time at the dance because Leo and Alex were there, but recently it’s been hard to talk to them without feeling insecure. I keep getting so caught up in my own brain that it’s tougher to know what’s going on in reality.

The other night I had a dream that I was watching TV and all the channels were a movie about a random man who kills himself, and everyone in his life realizes what they could have done differently for him. I thought it was weird, so I wrote it down, but when I read it back, I felt really scared and wanted to rip it out. Why did I have a dream like that? I can't stop thinking about it and I'm in class now so it's really distracting. Now that I think of it, I've been getting more nightmares and having trouble sleeping... I don't know what's going on with me. I feel okay when I have stuff to do, but I also get distracted and feel totally out of it a lot of the time. I don't know why it's harder for me to have really good days. Somehow, I mess up every day for myself and I'm tired of it. It's hard to explain, and no one would understand anyway. ~E

I finish writing and stare at the class whiteboard with my journal open in my lap. Murmurs of my teacher and classmates' voices buzz around me, but I can't understand anything. As I look at the chemistry posters on the wall to distract myself, everyone's faces appear out of focus. I feel their stares which makes my legs bounce aggressively and my mind speculate about what they could be thinking.

All morning my head has been racing around like some hyper dog, and of course I can't control it. Leo and Alex sit behind me and I wonder if they can see me fidgeting. The more I think about everyone else the hotter my cheeks get, and I wish I could go walk around in the halls. It's like ants are crawling inside my body, itching my bones and urging me to do anything else than this. My forehead begins to sweat, and I eventually get the courage to ask for the hall pass. As I get up, Leo looks at me carefully while Alex is asleep behind his textbook.

I take my bag and walk out into the empty hallway. As soon as I leave the room a weight lifts from my chest as I breathe. My face is still warm, probably from blushing with the class's attention on me. I walk down the tiled hall savoring the silence, while my thoughts continue to

play bumper cars against my skull. As I pass a wooden bench, I drop the dark blue hall pass that sits in my hand. I walk towards one of the side doors of the school, leading to the courtyard outside. Right now, I couldn't care less if I get in trouble for missing class, because the constant fidgeting in my body wants me to be alone.

I stroll away from school towards the park downtown. Thankfully the concrete doesn't have any snow on it, making it easier to walk in my black converse. I notice that most of the snow has melted from a storm a few weeks ago, leaving the grass damp and brown. A gray gloom fills the sky, and the air is crisp against my unzipped sweatshirt. After a minute I relax while taking deep breaths.

I consider going to Ed's to chill for a while. But Ed knows school is in session now, so he'd probably try to convince me to go back. I decide to go into the quiet park and find a damp bench to sit on. On a nearby playground, preschool children hang from the monkey bars and draw with colored chalk. I turn away from them and put on my headphones to drown their joyful screams. The first song to come on shuffle is "Trouble" by Coldplay, and the soft piano dances in my ears.

For the first time all day, relief flows through me as I focus on the music and gently swing my dangling legs back and forth. A gentle breeze rustles the branches above me, and I push up the sleeves on my sweatshirt, letting it cool my skin. A flock of birds fly over me as I tilt my head up to watch, jealous of their freedom.

Tears well up in my eyes and spill over. I look around for anyone walking nearby, but the only people in sight are the children and teachers on the playground. I try to let it pass but instead cry harder than my body feels prepared for. My chest tightens and my breath grows hot and

staggered, convulsing my body. I leap up from the bench and sprint away from the playground towards a small patch of pine trees.

I reach the center of the brush and lean my hands on one tree's thick, cracked bark. My knees buckle, bringing me to the wet grass below. My jeans are soaked with water from the weight of my body, but I can barely feel it. With my headphones still on, I notice that the song has changed, and I claw them off desperate to catch my breath. My stomach is queasy for a reason I can't understand, and I get scared of these sudden feelings, unsure of what to expect next. My breaths get shorter and quicker and soon I feel like I'm floating away to space.

I can't tell how long it's been, but the feelings slowly subside after a while. I regain feeling in my hands and chest, and my breath slows to a normal pace. The wetness from the grass spread to the underside of my legs, as I sit on the ground unable to get up. I put my headphones back on and focus on the music, breathing deeply while my fingers probe my neck to feel my slowing pulse. I hear a rustle from the trees behind me.

"Hey hon, are you okay? A few teachers saw you run over here and wanted to check on you," a woman's voice says. I look up. It's one of the preschool teachers who was watching the students on the playground.

"Um, yeah I'm fine thanks," I lie.

"What's your name? Do you go to Northside Highschool?" She looks at me with kind eyes as she reaches in her pocket for something. I jump up and run away, fearing she'll tell my parents what happened.

"Hey, it's okay! Don't run," I hear behind me. I don't look back, but I can tell she isn't following me. I sprint through the park in the direction of home, not sure if I actually want to get

there. My shoes are untied, and the laces slap the muddied grass. Cold air hits my face, quickly drying new tears leaking from my eyes.

March 25th: Dear Journal,

I don't know what's going on with me. I haven't really felt myself in weeks and I'm starting to think that I can't be happy anymore. No matter who I'm around or what I do, I feel so numb until I can't ignore it. Even being with Alex and Leo is really hard and the only way to make my mind stop is to sleep, or pound on my pillow until my arms are sore. It hurts, but at least it makes me feel something. There are some days where I feel kind of normal and I can talk to people without getting in my head, but most days I feel like I'm not a real person. Mom and Dad haven't found out about me skipping class last week, and I hope they don't. I don't know what I'd do if they got mad at me.

Sometimes I wish I could disappear forever, without anyone finding me. That way, I could be myself and no one else's opinion would matter. Abby would be the perfect only child, and I wouldn't have to ruin anyone else's life. I know I don't live up to Mom and Dad's expectations of me and it makes me feel shitty that they don't have the son they want. I can tell they think Abby is a better daughter than I am son and I know everyone would be better off without me around. It feels like I can't do anything right anymore. Maybe it's better to just sleep and forget about all the things I hate about myself for a while... ~E

I wake to feel a pounding in my head slow and steady. I gently touch my head and run my fingers through knotted and oily hair. I can't remember the last time I took a shower, but the heaving weight in my chest pulls me back down to my bed. I feel my journal beside me, but it falls to the floor as I hear Mom call.

“Elliot, hurry up it’s almost time for school!” I grunt and manage to pull myself to a sitting position. This room’s a sty. After cleaning it before, it’s even worse now as more clothes have piled on the floor and visible dust floats through the air. After grabbing my backpack from the trash heap, I put on the first things I find. I end up with dirty black vans, dark pants and Dad’s old Nirvana sweatshirt. I slap on my beanie and I don’t bother to look in the mirror before walking out the door. I listen for Abby’s usual morning gossip in the hallway, but strangely I can’t hear her. I walk towards her room to see if she’s awake, but before I can knock on her door Mom appears out of the bathroom.

“Elliot what are you still doing up here? Breakfast is getting cold! Abby’s staying home sick today so she’s sleeping,” she says.

“Oh, okay,” I answer tiredly. I hold the strap on my backpack, avoiding her eyes. She seems like she’s about to say something, then turns to attend to her ringing phone while brushing past me. I text Abby:

Dealing with Mom and Dad alone is NOT going to be easy Abby...feel better.

I poke at room temperature pancakes at the breakfast table while Mom and Dad have a conversation I can’t make out. My stomach is empty, but I don’t feel hungry enough to eat what’s in front of me. From the corner of my eye I see Abby walk into the kitchen wearing her pink bathrobe with tissue in her hand. Our eyes meet and she motions for me to check my phone. I’m sorry ☹. And thanks, I can only handle them so much too. I smile at my screen and Abby looks back at me knowingly.

“You look tired. Are you okay? Played too much Xbox last night?” she says.

“Yeah, I’m good just didn’t sleep well,” I say. She rummages in the cabinet which gets Mom and Dad’s attention.

“Well E, without Abby today it looks like it’s just you and me. Let’s get moving!” Dad says.

Abby watches me carefully. “Better get used to it Elliot, once I’m at college you and Dad will be riding to school together all the time!” she says mockingly.

As the school bell rings for lunchtime, and the halls flood with students eager to sit outside and eat mediocre food from the cafeteria. I grab my brown lunch bag and shuffle over to my usual spot on a stone wall in the school’s courtyard. The sun peeks out from the clouds and illuminates the greening grass below as I sit facing away from the crowds of students. I’m still not hungry, so I rummage around in my bag looking for my journal with my headphones still on. Before I can find it, Leo and Alex approach me.

“What’s good Elliot?” Alex calls from a distance. They both sit down without warning, making me jump. I keep concentrating on the music.

“Hey, are you listening to the new Panic at the Disco album?” Leo asks curiously. He stares at my shaking legs and I take one of my headphones out.

“Nah, I haven’t heard it yet. Radiohead,” I say while pointing into the headphone.

Leo smiles. “Cool, you’ll have to send me some of their stuff sometime.” Behind him Alex chews on a tuna sandwich, the fishy smell seeping into my nose and making my stomach turn.

“You guys should come over soon to play the new Assassin’s Creed game on my Xbox,” Alex says with his mouth full.

“Yeah, let’s do it Saturday after soccer practice,” Leo replies. They look at me waiting for a response.

“Yeah maybe, I’ll have to see what I have going on.” The bouncing in my legs gets more intense at the thought of committing to plans, but then I feel my phone buzz with another text from Abby:

Hey, want to pick up food from Ed’s right now and drive around? I’m already feeling better and I’m getting really hungry.

Yeah, sure sounds great, but whose car would you drive? I reply.

I asked Nan if I could borrow her car for the afternoon, she said I could as long as we get her some cherry pie from Ed’s. I chuckle and put my phone back in my bag.

The ringing school bell signals the end of lunch and everyone packs up their bags. I take extra-long to put everything back into my backpack so I can stay outside to meet Abby. Once the courtyard is quiet again, I wander around taking in the smell of spring air feeling relieved that I’m not going back to class. I feel my phone buzz.

Hey, I’m here now, walk down the block and I’ll pick you up.

Nan’s car pulls up and I trot across the courtyard. When I get in, I hear Harry Styles playing from the speakers. She quickly switches it to the radio station that plays the same four songs on repeat.

“Hey, how are you feeling?” I ask.

“Still have a stuffy nose, but it’s been nice having the house to myself.” She drives away from the school carefully.

“So, are we going to Ed’s?”

“Yeah, sure. Let’s drive for a little bit first. It’s not often that I drive without Mom and Dad in the car.” She looks nervously back and forth at the side window, as if searching for something to say.

“What are you looking at?” I ask.

“What, I can’t look at my own brother?” she asks defensively and then hesitates. “How’s stuff going, Elliot? What’s going on with you?” My knees have finally calmed down, letting my body relax. But Abby’s meddling tone makes me tense up again.

“Uhm, I’m fine I guess,” I say. Abby gives me a look similar to when Mom’s about to make a really long work call. She lets a dense silence linger in the air like I could cut it with a knife.

She takes a deep breath. “Elliot, I guess I’ve been, I don’t know...worried about you.” A chill goes down my spine as she speaks.

“What do you mean?” I ask.

“I don’t know, you just seem so down all the time. You barely come out of your room and you don’t have interest in anything besides playing Xbox, going to Ed’s, and writing in that journal I found in your room,” Abby says in one breath.

“Wait what?” My stomach drops and my heart jumps.

“You’re not the most social guy, E. You have Leo and Alex, but Mom says you haven’t been seeing them recently.”

“No, what was the last thing you said? You went into my room? What were you doing in there?”

Abby blushes as she realizes what she said. “Elliot, I found your journal, okay? I went into your room to look for an extra charger and I saw it open on your floor.”

“And you put it back where you found it?” Another long silence fills the car as we come to a stop sign near downtown.

“It was open, Elliot! I read what you wrote last night! You want to disappear and have no one find you? And all that bad stuff about me? Do you really think Mom and Dad love me more than you?” I pull at the fabric seatbelt that covers my chest, while fire embers kindle in the pit of my stomach.

“Abby how could you do that?! That is my *private* journal meant for my own eyes!” I bang my fist down on the arm rest, my breath heavy and deep.

Abby’s eyes widen. “You need to tell Mom and Dad about how you’ve been feeling, Elliot. What you’ve been writing about is really scary and awful. It’s okay to be moody but what you’re feeling is a lot worse than that. I know I would feel like a terrible sister if I knew about this and didn’t tell anyone, especially before I go away to college. I don’t want to leave you here if you’re having such a hard time. Let me help.” Her effort to hold back tears fails as she drops her face into her hands. Seeing her upset extinguishes the burning in me, and I feel my own tears dropping from my eyes. She pulls the car into an empty CVS parking lot and we sit, holding each other.

“Abby, I can’t tell Mom and Dad yet, I just can’t. They would make it a big deal and I wouldn’t be able to handle all the attention right now.”

“Elliot, don’t worry okay? We’ll figure it out,” She squeezes me tight.

April 14th: Dear Journal,

Since Abby freaked out about the stuff I write in here, she's insisted to help me get through it. She doesn't want to push me to tell Mom and Dad unless I agree to, which is the least she can do for reading about my private thoughts and emotions. It's been a few weeks and honestly, I feel a little better knowing that I have someone to talk to. She's really busy with school and everything but she's come into my room almost every night to talk to me about whatever I want. Mom and Dad think it's cute that we're spending time together, so I don't think they suspect anything weird.

It's not like I don't want to talk to them about it, but it just seems like a bad time. With Abby's graduation coming up, I don't want to ruin their lives or make it harder for them or bring anyone down just because I've been having bad days. I keep telling Abby that she doesn't have to care so much, but she insists that we maintain this little secret agreement. It's working for now, so hopefully I'll keep feeling better if things stay like this. ~E

Ed's isn't as crowded this afternoon as it usually is, but there are a lot of people working on computers or reading while sipping coffee. It feels nice to be like them, someone who comes here to take in the atmosphere and just exist. It almost makes me think I'm a real writer. I'm happy today because my mind is comfortable and is keeping up with the traffic flows of the day. I look up at the mural, reminding myself of this feeling of stillness and space, like the large painted moon.

As long as Ed's is standing, the ceiling will remain the same with its brilliant painted shapes and free spirit. I don't know how old the mural is, but everyone that has walked into Ed's typically looks up to the inside roofing to study it. The painted moon has seen many nights, days, and strange faces of all kinds. But through it all, the mural remains the same. I've tried to mimic

the painting in my journal plenty of times, but I've never done it successfully because there's so much detail to capture. I'll have to ask Ed about who painted it.

Mom texts me to come home, so I walk back enjoying the fresh air. When I finally see the light blue shutters of our house, inside is in a state of commotion. Mom is in the kitchen decorating a white frosted cake with green lettering. Rainbow streamers flow from the ceiling in all directions. Dad sets plastic cups on the table.

Mom says, "Elliot, good! Just in time! It's Nan's birthday today, remember?" I take my headphones off and stare at her blankly. She furrows her brows. "You forgot? Well, we have people coming by in an hour so please get yourself ready!"

"The whole family's coming in from out of town, should be a fun day!" Dad says. Walking upstairs, my legs are weak from the stress of this surprise. I can't believe I forgot it was Nan's birthday and feel guilty for not getting her a present. I take off my bag and shoes and flop down on my bed clutching my sheets to my chest. My thoughts flow at what this party will be like.

Everyone is going to ask uncomfortable personal questions.

You're not social enough to have a good conversation, you're too quiet.

Abby will have to do all the talking as usual. You should just stay in bed.

I sit in silence for a few minutes as my thoughts spin on like a running washing machine. Mom and Dad are still moving around downstairs, and more guilt washes over me for not wanting to get ready or participate in everything they have planned. I get up, walk across the hallway, and knock gently on Abby's white wooden door.

"Elliot, is that you? Come in," she says. I open the door and she's sitting at her desk looking in the mirror. She has makeup in front of her and her arm hangs over her head, curling her hair. "Light On" by Maggie Rodgers plays from her speaker but she turns it off.

“Hey, what’s going on? How was Ed’s?” I sit on the blue sheets covering her bed and watch as she continues to fix her hair.

“I forgot Nan’s birthday party was today. I don’t think I can handle talking to everyone, Abby.”

She looks at my reflection in the mirror and sighs. “Elliot, you’ve been doing well recently from what I can tell. I’m sure you’ll be fine, okay? You still have some time to get ready.” She checks the time on her phone.

“I can’t stop thinking about what’ll go wrong, Abby. I can’t.”

“If you get nervous and need some space, I’m sure no one will notice. Look I have to get ready, so I don’t have time to talk now, but I’ll see you downstairs soon.” She waves me away and I walk back to my room, staring blankly at the floor.

Downstairs the doorbell rings every few minutes, and as more time passes the noise of voices and music grows louder. I anticipate the chaos of the party while shuffling through the growing pile of clothes on my floor, unable to find a nice shirt to wear.

“Elliot, Abby, hurry up! Everyone is going to be here soon!” Mom calls up. My chest and stomach tighten as I rough up my hair, trying to make it look presentable. Before walking downstairs, I knock on Abby’s door.

“Abby, please, can I talk to you really fast again?”

She grunts. “Elliot, look, not now okay? We’ve been talking a lot and I want today to be good for both of us. Give one of your friends a call or something, I have to get dressed.” I stomp back into my room and throw my head into a pillow. Feeling sure that no one will hear me with the growing noise downstairs, I scream into the feathered plush until my lungs burn and I’m out of breath.

I arrive downstairs in my unwashed Foals tee, with tired eyes and sweaty palms. The kitchen and living room are filled with people, most of whom I only see at holiday parties. Mom, Dad, and Abby are spread out each talking to a different family member with drinks in their hands, so I grab a soda to feel less awkward.

I scan the scene looking for an empty spot to stand when Nan calls, “Elliot! Honey, over here. Come give me a hug!” She sits on the couch surrounded by four women I don’t recognize who stare at me with wide eyes. When I walk over, I’m greeted with a choir of voices all talking at me at once. Over the loud music and various conversations, I can’t make out what they’re saying but I lean into Nan’s chest smelling her lavender perfume and feeling the fuzz on her favorite sweater. She whispers, “Such a sweet boy, my Elliot.” She kisses my cheek and I smile, feeling like we’re the only two people in the room. Her wrinkled hand gently pats me on the back, and I start being questioned by the unknown women.

“Elliot, you’re so tall now, how’s school?”

“What do your friends and you like to do for fun?”

“Do you have a girlfriend?”

“Must be sad that Abby is leaving for college soon, huh?”

As I open my mouth to answer Nan cuts in, “Leave the poor boy alone! Elliot, can you go check on the cake for me? Let me know what flavor it is.” She knowingly winks, and I sigh with relief as I walk away.

As the afternoon goes on, I become weak against a busy current as if I’m swimming into waves that keep getting bigger. My head hurts from the constant noise and all I want to do is lie in bed.

I walk to the backyard and stand by our old wooden swing set, appreciating the sun and the gentle hush of people chatting. I watch them from afar, still sipping on my lukewarm soda from earlier. Abby stands with one of our aunts by the cooler, smiling in the same dress she wore to the winter dance. To pass the time, I consider eavesdropping to write funny quotes to show Nan later.

“Elliot, honey what’s going on? You’ve been quiet the whole afternoon,” Mom says as she approaches.

“What? I’m fine Mom, I’m just tired.” She glances at my wrinkled shirt and her mouth turns downward.

“Are those clothes even clean? Hon, when’s the last time you did laundry? It’s Nan’s special day and you’re wearing a scary band shirt.” Her words are like bullets hitting my chest, each of them surprising me because I hadn’t thought about my appearance until now. Suddenly worried about disappointing her and looking weird in front of the family, a rush of heat flows into my body. I take a breath to speak but my chest tightens, making it harder to breathe. I put a hand to my heart and feel tears fall from my eyes, unable to control myself as I scurry toward the house.

“Elliot, hey come back!” Mom calls behind me. Inside, I pass the hustling party and feel an overwhelming glare from the faces in the room. When I finally get to my door, I burst in as the walls start to close in on me. I turn around searching for what to do, but all I can manage is to get down on the floor, lying still as my throat feels like it’s being squeezed by a cobra. Each breath is quick and difficult, my chest moving rapidly. As I close my eyes my stomach flips and I feel like could vomit. I rub my shaking hands on the carpet under me, desperate to be distracted. Eventually I hear movement from the hallway and my family’s voices.

“Abby, what happened to him, what’s going on?” Dad asks while he knocks on the door.

“Dad, I don’t know! He’s upset, that’s all,” Abby says.

“Elliot, hon, I’m sorry can I come in?” Mom asks from the door. She opens it anyway and all of them stand in the doorway, looking at me. After a few moments Mom kneels on the floor and gently strokes my hair. With the touch of her fingertips my chest slows down and I’m able to breathe normally again, but tears fall from the sides of my eyes.

I hear Nan. “What’s wrong with my Elliot?” Dad and Abby try to shield her from entering the room.

“Hey sweetie, you’re okay I’m right here,” Mom says softly.

“The poor boy is overwhelmed, you invited too many people here. Even *I’m* exhausted from talking to them all,” Nan says.

“Look, I’m sorry Mom, I didn’t know it was going to make Elliot upset,” Dad says to Nan.

Nan scowls. She rarely gets angry but when she squints her eyes like that it’s clear she’s upset about something. “Of course, because you don’t listen to what Elliot has to say. You all are so busy with yourselves that he’s practically been on his own. He clearly needs you all. Anxiety runs in the family; he should know about that kind of thing!” She gestures to me. Mom, Dad and Abby look at each other in shock. Nan sits on my bed, her eyebrows still furrowed.

Mom squeezes my hand. “I’m—I’m sorry Elliot. Your father and I just thought you liked being left alone... I’m sorry we haven’t been there for you more. Are you okay?”

All I can do is lay in her arms, for once happy that everyone is here. “Yeah... I think so.”

Nan says, “Let’s let you rest a while, okay? Don’t worry about everyone else, we’ll take care of it.” Mom and Dad help me to my feet as Abby leads Nan out of the room. As I

exhaustedly flop on the bed Mom and Dad grab my hands, looking at me in silence. When they leave, Abby brushes past them back into the room and she lies down next to me.

“Elliot, I’m so sorry. You needed me today and I-”

“Abby, no. It’s not your fault. I’m okay, really. I’m sorry I put all this stuff on you.” I say. She sighs deeply and turns on her side facing me.

“You don’t have to be sorry, Elliot. I just didn’t know what to do or say, and I was so worried about you today. Panic attacks seem like they’re rough, especially if you don’t have them all the time. But *don’t* scare me like that again, okay?” She gets up from the bed and makes her way towards the door. “I love you little bro.”

May 1st: Dear Journal,

I’m at Ed’s right now and the sun is out. The space mural on the ceiling is brighter than ever and those little spacemen are still flying toward the moons. I look at them now and admire them for what they are. Though it sucks sometimes, I’m okay with staying here on earth for the moment.

Since Nan’s birthday party, things are a lot different at home, in a good way. Once Mom and Dad literally saw me having a panic attack, they have been checking in on me when they think I’m feeling down, which I appreciate. They also talked with me about some mental health stuff that runs in our family, and apparently Mom gets bad anxiety too from time to time. Also, I guess Nan was the one who told them to check on me the day of her party, because she could tell what was happening. Without ever talking to me about it before, she knew and has been looking out for me for a while, starting when she gave me this journal.

I thought that Mom and Dad would judge or baby me if they knew what I was going through, but I can tell now that they’re really trying, and I feel better knowing that they just want me to be

happy. Abby feels bad about not being able to help me more, but I've been drawing some pictures she can take to college, so hopefully she knows it was never her job in the first place. I think we'll be okay because last weekend we all went to Ed's to celebrate Abby's graduation, and Abby told me how proud she is of me. Even though I compare myself to her a lot, I'm proud of her too.

My days are still filled with a numb feeling a lot of the time, but I feel better knowing that I don't have to deal with it all on my own. I even got the courage to tell Alex and Leo about how I get anxious, and surprisingly they asked how they can help. They may not totally understand what I was talking about, but either way it was nice.

Mom wants me to tell my doctor about my issues because she says there is medicine that can help me with panic attacks and other stuff. I don't know if I want to take any random medicine but telling a professional person who can help may be good for me. I think writing in this journal has helped me start to feel comfortable talking about myself and not feel bad about it, I guess that's a good start.

For now, I'll keep doing my thing at Ed's, this time with a decaf tea instead of coffee. ~E

Part III: Self-Analysis

For the creative part of my thesis, I wrote two major drafts of "Mural of Moons." The first draft was written in October 2020 before the bulk of my research, and the second draft was completed in February 2021 after I acquired information to write my analysis in part one. In this section, I will be looking at key differences between my two drafts, and the informed decisions behind the major changes I made.

My original goal for the short story was to convey a narrative of a young boy with growing mental health concerns while emphasizing his relationships with family and friends,

especially with his sister Abby. In my two primary texts *Thirteen Reasons Why* and *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, other characters beside the protagonist play a large role in their narratives. Using these texts as inspiration, I wanted to convey a similar idea in my short story. In my first draft, I attempted to do this by writing in a third person omniscient point of view. My protagonist was the focal character while his sister provided another perspective to explain the emotions of somebody caring for another with mental health concerns. I wrote different sections when the perspective changed, while also including Elliot's journal entries. This format is still something I'd like to explore in the future, but for the purpose of this thesis it was most beneficial to me to keep a single perspective.

After writing the first draft I realized that the story would be better told in first person from the perspective of my protagonist. Though at first this choice seemed to follow the path of many other novels in this genre, writing in first person was much more effective at portraying Elliot's emotions. With this point of view, I ended up putting more attention on Elliot's thoughts and was able to add more depth to his character. Though some focus is lost with others in the narrative, I attempted to keep them prevalent in the story by adding more conversations and scenes between them.

Additionally, I found that utilizing Elliot's journal entries as a "third space" was easier to accomplish in a first-person narrative. In my first draft it was more difficult to portray Elliot's emotions in his journal because there wasn't enough context in the narration. But with the first-person perspective in my second draft, Elliot's state of mind is already understood in the narration when others are around while the journal portrays his true and sometimes dark reality that he hides from others. I believe the choice to switch from third person omniscient to first person aided the story by giving more context and depth to Elliot's character while challenging

me to keep others just as prevalent. It also required me to think more about Elliot's character and ultimately helped me learn what was most successful when writing his story.

Another key aspect I wanted to improve upon in my second draft was the authenticity of Elliot as a narrator. In the research I found, many critics discuss the challenge of maintaining reliability of a main character with mental health concerns. I feared that if Elliot was not honest with himself and readers, then the authenticity of his story would leave room for skepticism. Overall, I wanted readers to be willing to follow Elliot on his personal journey without judgement while sympathizing for his struggles. I accomplished this most by crafting raw honesty in his journal and making it an intimate factor between readers and Elliot. I saw the potential of freedom in his journal writing, so when conflict became more prevalent in Elliot's mind, the journal entries grow in intensity.

Through the major changes from first draft to second I highlighted noticeable differences in Elliot's character through his journals and in real life. I reasoned that if readers pick up on how much Elliot is hurting in his journals and then witness his reaction to when people attempt to help him, then it would prompt them to think about what they would do or say if they were his friends. Additionally, in my first draft I felt Elliot's experiences were too ambiguous. Before researching, I was unsure of exactly what I wanted Elliot to be struggling with and the kinds of things that trigger him. This led to my first draft being less specific than intended, and Elliot's struggle harder to pin down for readers. After my research, I decided to convey more specific instances of insecurity, social anxiety, and panic attacks. So, in my second draft I created particular scenes that illustrate what Elliot is experiencing as a way of describing rather than diagnosing him.

The most important aspect I wanted to improve upon in my second draft was balancing light and dark moments. In one of my primary texts *13 Reasons Why*, the narrator's experience seemed to worsen as the chapters went on with no hope of recovery or happiness considering she commits suicide by the end. When analyzing this text, I knew I wanted to avoid this narrative arch so in my second draft I attempted to include more moments of happiness for Elliot in order to balance the negative thoughts and feelings he often has. For example, his favorite space to be is at a café, where he usually feels free to be himself and safe with his own thoughts. Despite other moments of conflict or distress, he finds refuge by being in Ed's café. I wanted these scenes to provide a mental break not only for Elliot, but for readers. Additionally, I wanted his relationships to be somewhat positive as well. For instance, it was important to me that I include characters who consistently show their concern about Elliot's well-being like Abby and Leo. Though Elliot may not acknowledge it, readers understand that Elliot does have people in his life who are willing to help him.

Including a balance between light and dark moments is important when tackling difficult topics such as mental health. If a narrative only includes dark moments and despair, then readers may leave the story in a poor headspace. But by balancing moments of good and bad, it creates a narrative that may be easier to absorb and defeat stigmas that people who are suffering with mental health always feel bad or have consistent trauma.

Overall, while writing my first and second drafts I noticed myself growing as a writer by being able to identify my own errors and areas for improvement. I had to work hard against my own biases and assumptions on what a story like this includes, and I recognize that my story still falls into some trends of sick-lit. For example, I notice that my story can be considered a chaos narrative noted by Scrofano, given that the majority of it is about how Elliot's mental struggles

takes over his life. In the future, I'd be interested in adding or re-working my story to include more of Elliot's recovery process and happiness. My intention for my second draft was to create a narrative that relates to the people discovering their mental illness for the first time and those who may be afraid to reach out for help. I also wanted to include perspective on others who may know someone who is mentally unwell but don't know how to help. My research process illuminated strategies I could use to accomplish this and encouraged me to look at my own writing more carefully while considering the successes and downfalls of my primary texts.

Part IV: Conclusion

While working on this project over the past year, I've concluded that young adult fiction is more complex than one may anticipate because there is a responsibility for adult authors to write narratives that will connect with young audiences in influential ways. All literature has the power to teach and impact its readers, but especially young adult fiction. Specifically, novels about difficult topics like mental health are vital now more than ever given an unprecedented level of public awareness about these issues. However, these narratives are often difficult to get right without overdramatizing or portraying negative themes.

My research has led me to deduce that fictional mental health narratives must contain certain elements in order to be both reliable and to resonate with its audiences. For example, in order to diminish stigmas around mental health, characters must be portrayed in an authentic way. However, the biggest challenge with creating a narrative about mental health is that no two experiences are the same. It may look like someone suffering for a short period of time due to loss or trauma, with mostly good days. Or it could be someone coping with severe mental illness who suffers every day. In order to properly research trends and characteristics of a mentally

unwell young person, it's important to keep in mind scientific data and psychology that can guide an author's character development.

A large part of my research that I did not anticipate was the discovery of sick-lit. When I discovered its existence, I quickly recognized the fascination and curiosity of this topic in pop culture. Similar to how many are intrigued by horror narratives, I ask, why are people so fascinated with narratives that include despair or tragedy? Ultimately, I concluded that the popularity of sick-lit and other associated genres provides an opportunity for more narratives about mental health to be brought to light, therefore creating more conversations and interpretation. So, though I believe there is a fine line between respecting the subject matter and romanticizing it for marketing purposes, sick-lit also works towards destigmatizing experiences of mental illness.

Overall, when written with proper research and attention, young adult fiction about mental illness has the potential to guide readers on their own path to finding help or bringing insight to their experiences and reminding them they're not alone. With more positive narratives like these in public circulation, mental illness will hopefully become more normalized in a society where many people continue to struggle with it.

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