

## **Fallen Angel**

*I wonder what it was like, when you died. Did the color gently drain out of your already-pale face? Or was it a sharp pain, like when the pinprick first pressed into your arm? I bet the scars across your wrists glowed a soft red in the haze of your dresser light. I bet you shrugged your left sweatshirt sleeve down to cover them, leaving the other pushed up over an emaciated right bicep, exposing an inner elbow, blue and thin. I wonder, moments before, if you looked outside and watched the snowflakes as they tumbled around the sky. I wonder, as the needle touched pale skin, if your body went from nagging to cold, numb. I wonder, as this happened, if you had any control over yourself at all.*

*When your eyes closed and head fell forward, did your mother's face flash across your mind, folding your clothes in the downstairs laundry room, color-coding shirts, matching socks? Did you think about that boy you thought you loved, away at sea, short military haircut and dirty fingernails, counting on your face in the video camera later that night to get him through the week? Did you think about me, three-hundred and ninety-four miles away, at a small college in Iowa, who cried when she heard the news, cried over a neighbor girl she'd never even talked to? Did you think about anything? Or were you already gone?*

I was born and raised in Naperville: a high-class suburb about 30 miles southwest of Chicago. It was, for me, the perfect place to grow up. I was only a train ride from the city, but far enough away that I could feel separated from its fast pace. I was connected, but still distant enough to be safe. Growing up, Naperville had everything for me. From the McDonalds hangout down the street, to the movie theatre and restaurants across the four-way intersection, to the five

bowling alleys in a fifteen-minute radius—I was set. Known for its impressive school district and ritzy downtown area, Naperville was rated by *Money* magazine in 2005 as the “third-best place to live in America” and “the country’s best place to be a kid” in 2004 by the U.S. Census Bureau.<sup>1</sup> I enjoyed growing up in Naperville. There was always something to do, and if there wasn’t, well, we teenagers could find something.

Junior year of high school: I am standing at the front corridor glass window, watching a boy cross the freshly-paved parking lot. It’s almost eleven on a Tuesday and he’s sauntering up to the sidewalk in the clothes he wore yesterday, hair greasy against his sweaty forehead. He reaches the door, pushes it open. With wide eyes he scans the hall, pupils large and black. He smells like outside leaves and wind, but something chemical, too. His movements are jerky, awkward. He begins to ramble about the red sky at night and how fast his heart is beating. There is a twig in his hair and a smudge of dirt across his cheek. His clothes are matted and wrinkled; I can see a joint peeking out of his front jean pocket.

I find out later that he spent the night outside on his roof. I learn that he came across drugs from a friend-of-a-friend, someone he dealt pot with, some guy who owed him. This time it was acid. He took it the day before in the middle of the Art Wing, started tripping then left and walked to his house a few blocks north. He was awake all night, watching the sky shift and change, laughing at patterns and animals and colors that didn’t exist.

In the eighth grade, this boy and I used to be best friends. I would listen to him read Bible verses at Wednesday night youth group, hear him play Eliot Yamin on the piano, and watch him

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<sup>1</sup> Dennis Rodkin. "Why Everybody Loves Naperville." *Chicago Magazine*, March 2006. *Chicago Arts & Culture*, 25 June 2007. Web.

give his lunch-lady mama a hug every morning in the cafeteria. Now his eyes are rimmed red and his skin is thin, bones brittle.

I wonder who this boy is, this boy with matted hair and a dirty face. I wonder if I can still see him as the same person, the boy I knew back in eighth grade. In some ways, I am angry with him. I am frustrated at the person he's become and the careless choices he has made; yet, when I see those red-rimmed eyes there is a part of me that understands he can't help it.

I've made choices like the ones he's made. I've felt the taste of tequila on my lips; I've flirted with the thought of a drug so powerful it could make my mind spin. I know what it's like to want to pull away from the world, especially when things get hard. Maybe his family, his life, isn't as picture perfect as it seems to be. Maybe like me, like every adolescent, he felt invincible for a moment. Maybe it was a mistake, one he couldn't undo, and suddenly he couldn't stop. The drugs kept pulling him back.

February 1, 2012, a story appears in the *Daily Herald Online*, a seventeen-year-old resident of my hometown, Naperville, Illinois, was arrested for selling heroin. She was observed by detectives completing a drug transaction in the corner parking lot of Route 59 and 75<sup>th</sup> Street, about ten blocks east of our high school, in between the Lowe's Hardware and X-Sport Gym. Stopped at 9:04 pm, she was found to be in possession of "several foil packets and other paraphernalia," and according to Naperville police, "all of these items tested positive for heroin."<sup>2</sup>

In the wake of her arrest, the community and the local high school were in an uproar. Public comments were posted under the delinquent's online mug shot, saying that she was 'fucked up,' 'a shame,' 'pathetic.' People questioned what was wrong with her, why she would

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<sup>2</sup> "Naperville Police Arrest Three Accused of Selling Heroin." *Daily Herald Online*. Paddock Publications, 3 Feb. 2012. Web.

do something so horrible, why she would bring this drug into such a safe, highly-praised community. In many ways, she had become the Naperville scapegoat. She was the one who was caught; blaming her was convenient.

After hearing the news of the arrest, I was scrolling through my Facebook homepage when I came across a post from a girl I went to high school with, a year older than me.

February 3, 2012:

Dear heroin-obsessed youth of Naperville,

Is this real life? Can you even get into an R-rated movie by yourself? I don't want to be in another state and have to worry about my 17 and 14-year-old brothers being pressured to do hard drugs, so if you could please stop getting high and doing illegal shit that'd be awesome. Or AT LEAST limit to underage drinking like any other bored little Chicago suburbanites. Better yet, go read a book. Thanks.

PS. Are you even old enough to drive yet?

Attached at the bottom of the post was a photograph and link. The picture was of the seventeen-year-old girl, red-faced and swollen eyes: her mug shot. The link, if the viewer clicked on it, connected to the page explaining the girl's arrest. In the comments, the Facebook-poster wrote that she found out the girl who had been arrested was a dancer in high school as well. She had commented on her own post, "dumb bitch is making us [dancers] look bad."

My fingers went still, hovering over the 'add comment' button for several minutes. I wanted to agree with the user's post. I had wanted to say that yes, I was scared too. Scared for my younger sister, thirteen at the time. I was terrified she would fall into the trap, be influenced

by peers or friends. I had wanted to agree. This girl was only seventeen and a dancer, no less. She could have had a future, but she was selling drugs. Why?

But I couldn't. I couldn't write anything. There was something bubbling up inside me, a feeling that made the tips of my ears red and my eyes water. I was angry. I couldn't believe the words of this Facebook-poster only a year older than me, so harsh and judgmental. It was as if she'd never been a teenager herself, never taken a shot of vodka or considered the thought of drugs, even for a moment. The nerve to bash someone who could be dealing with pressures from home or school, who could have accidentally slipped into the wrong crowd, who could have been coerced by 'friends.' She was only a few years younger, dressed in a white and black tie-dye t-shirt—a girl who looked like any other seventeen-year-old. But she had done it. She had used heroin and she had sold it. Her choices were affecting others. These choices—to use, to sell.

I rested my hands next to the keyboard, eyes still fixed on the page. It was easy to write hate-filled social network posts from hundreds of miles away. It was easy to point fingers, to blame this girl and other heroin users. But I couldn't blame her. She made a wrong choice. She was suffering from addiction of both mind and body—incapable of control. This girl looked like half the other teen girls I knew: my teammate, my younger sister, even me. Yet, I still wasn't sure if I could fully sympathize with her story. A part of me knew she wasn't completely innocent; choice or addiction she was still somewhat responsible. But the other part of me, the part that loves the rush that comes with a sip of alcohol, could see her as both—a tragic victim of uncontrolled cravings and a product of her own terrible choices.

In an article in the *Beacon News*, author Denise Crosby reveals an entirely new perspective, this on the side of the seventeen-year-old. The girl's lawyer described her as a

“bright, articulate, and highly motivated girl who, like many teens in the western suburbs, became addicted after being introduced to heroin by a so-called friend.”<sup>3</sup> The lawyer had argued for the girl, saying that public opinion displayed her as a drug dealer, when in fact, she was just a teenage girl “struggling with addiction.”<sup>3</sup>

The article also mentioned the emotional perspective of the seventeen-year-old’s mother, that “neighbors turned against the family; someone even put up a sign on their property that read ‘Drug Dealer Lives Here.’”<sup>3</sup> The family “had to fight to get a traditional congratulatory sign for seniors posted in their front yard, despite [their daughter’s] graduating with honors.”<sup>3</sup>

When I first found out about the arrest, my stomach turned over. I couldn’t believe that this had happened in my hometown, the place I had known and grown up in. I felt bad for this girl, this poor girl who would now become the poster child for drug abuse throughout the country. This girl whose name would be recognized at every college campus, on every news station, and at the top of many Google searches. I couldn’t understand why a privileged Naperville teen would have to turn to heroin. Sure, high school gets tough and family issues are hard. Sure, peer pressure plays a role, but heroin?

Towards the end of the article, the seventeen-year-old’s mother responded to the sign in her yard and the other hate-filled online messages, “It’s that holier-than-thou side of the community that hurts these kids so much. . . . We were also judgmental before.”<sup>3</sup> She is right. Society’s opinion is not focused on responsibility or being moved to make a difference; rather, the focus is on finding someone to blame. And this blame was the reason I couldn’t respond to the Facebook post. I didn’t know why this girl had turned to drugs, so I couldn’t write anything.

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<sup>3</sup> Denise Crosby. "Neuqua Heroin Arrest: Lawyer, Family Accuse Naperville Police of Entrapment, Prosecutors Disagree." *The Beacon News*. Chicago Sun-Times Media, 4 July 2013. Web.

Several months prior, in July 2011, two high school males were pronounced dead due to drug-related causes. One boy, as the *Daily Herald Online* reports, “was found unresponsive on his back porch July 6,” and according to the DuPage coroner’s office, “died of heroin intoxication related to recreational drug use.”<sup>4</sup> The two boys passed away only five days apart.

January 2012: A month before the seventeen-year-old girl’s arrest, another teenage girl, one who lived down the street from me, passed away from heroin-related causes. A shocking article published March 2012 read, “The light was on in [her]...bedroom late that January night... [Her father]...walked in and was startled to find his 18-year-old daughter curled into a ball, face down in front of her dresser. He feared the worst when he felt the rigidity of her shoulders and saw the discoloration in her face. There was foam around her mouth, but no breath escaping.”<sup>5</sup>

After the seventeen-year-old’s arrest, the story of this eighteen-year-old’s death resurfaced, becoming a major issue in Naperville, as it connected back to the deaths of the two boys the previous summer and made links between both users and dealers in the community.

At this point, the issue of heroin use became more pressing. In the last year, Naperville had undergone six heroin-related deaths with victims ranging in ages from seventeen to thirty.<sup>5</sup> In 2011, 47 heroin-related arrests were made, with an increase of 78% felony drug charges and a rise by 450% in heroin arrests alone.<sup>5</sup>

In the weeks to follow the eighteen-year-old’s death, a public forum was held. Her parents were in attendance; however, they were presenting another side of the heroin issue—a

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<sup>4</sup> Josh Stockinger. "Naperville Teens Died of Drug-Related Causes." *Daily Herald Online*, 1 Sept. 2011. Web.

<sup>5</sup> Melissa Jenco. "Naperville Parents Who Lost Daughter to Heroin Try to Educate Other Kids, Parents." *Chicago Tribune*. N.p., 12 Mar. 2012. Web.

side in contrast to the majority of the community. Their opinion centered on the idea of drug addiction. They were in support of their daughter, presenting the underlying, painful fact of her death: her inability to free herself from heroin's hold. For her parents, the issue of heroin was more complex than using vs. not using. It was understanding what it meant to completely lose control to a drug, to have no choice. For these parents and other parents of addicts, the focus was on awareness rather than blame.

This debate about addiction vs. choice continued in the wake of the seventeen-year-old's arrest. The Facebook group *Open Hearts Open Eyes*, started in 2012, dealt with this controversy directly. This group of 7,845 members from Naperville and surrounding areas, and with numbers still increasing, serves as a board for thoughts, stories, support, questions, advice, comments, and fears. Current and recovering addicts share their successes and failures, give support to those who are struggling, and ask for support themselves. Family members type tearful messages about addicted children, brothers, sisters. A worried mother asks about a son, missing for three weeks. A friend writes a love note to one he's lost, encouraging others to stay clean. On October 13, 2013 a mother writes, "I believe addiction is a disease. However, I also believe to use or not, to lie or not, to steal or not, etc. is a choice."

For the Naperville community, it is only a short drive to Chicago down I-290—the Heroin Highway, as it is referred to by locals and the Naperville police. An addict, with shaking hands and tingling fingers will get behind that shiny suburban car and drive down the expressway, with no regard for police, or getting mugged, or even dying. For an addict, it is a loss of control. But yet, it is always a choice—a choice to consume, to buy, to sell.

There are the facts of addiction, the struggles of withdrawal. At the same time, there is the community's perception: a drug user is one who is weak-minded, unable to choose the right path, unwilling to change, careless, stubborn. Or, in the case of the high school males, the seventeen-year-old dealer, the eighteen-year-old girl—a drug user is simply 'fucked up.'

July 2012: After my sophomore year of college, I return home for the summer and attend a party at a friend's house. I step outside of the house for a breath of fresh air and sit on an overturned recycling bin on the edge of the driveway.

A girl in a skin-tight black skirt, heels, and a loose white blouse walks towards me. She stops about two feet away, lights a cigarette, then takes a drag. She looks down at her cell phone. The screen light shines on her pointed nose and harsh brown eyes and I recognize her face. It's been two years since I've seen her, almost five months since her arrest.

She notices me staring. "Hey," she says. Her voice is scratchy, thick.

"Hey."

I take a moment to study her. She looks the same—thin, curvy, dark brown eyelashes. She's still pretty, but now in a more dangerous way.

I remember back two years. We became close by association, through mutual friends. She wasn't the type of girlfriend to call when my mother and I fought, but I could call her if I wanted to chill with a few people, wanted to get high.

"How are you?" I ask. It's a stupid question. It cannot span the past two years; it cannot make sense of her arrest or answer any of my questions.

"Sober," she returns.

The lines of her face appear drawn and tight. She gazes out at the street, the cars and quiet neighboring houses. I ponder the double meaning of her reply.

It seems like just a few months ago we were passing blunts back and forth, counting to four, holding our breath then exhaling slow. Those were the days of my rebellion, the period in high school where I dated the bad boy, tried pot, blew stoplights, lied to my parents. In the span of two years, I had changed. The transition to college smoothed the rebellious wrinkles, made me wiser with alcohol and cars and friends and boys.

She turns and holds out her cigarette to me, "Want a drag?"

I had moved on, but she had continued, somehow gotten herself entangled in the spiral. Marijuana turned to heroin. A casual smoke turned into a perpetual high. Then a need. The need to float, to feel that release. And the need to sell to get money to buy to feel the high. A cycle.

I get up from the recycling bin, wobble for a moment on my stilettos, then cross the space between us. I touch her cigarette to my lips, take a long drag.

"It's good to see you." I say. And it is.

I pass the cigarette back. For a moment our fingertips graze. Hers are cold and bony. And suddenly I understand. Suddenly I cannot be mad at her for putting our hometown on the map for the youngest heroin dealer in the country. I cannot be mad at her for the deaths that follow, though indirectly, still connected to this poisonous drug. I cannot be mad at her for the downward spiral, for the changes, for the choices. In this moment, as our fingertips touch, we are the same. It was a mistake, and she is the lucky one. Alive, breathing.

"Take care of yourself," I say, as I turn to head into the house.

My own voice echoes quiet in my head, *it could have been me.*

*I wonder what it was like to feel that high. To have everything come crashing at once, to feel a release so strong you'd chase it anywhere, everywhere. I wonder if you were sad when you pushed that needle into your arm. I wonder if you were scared, or lonely.*

*I was in my dorm room when I heard the news. It hit me in the chest and I immediately started crying. I had seen you around the high school. You wore thick eye makeup with rainbow-colored eye shadow. Your hair was short and choppy; you had pale lips and wore low-cut tops to class. In the mornings you smoked and straightened your hair in the D-Wing girl's bathroom. Eight in the morning just listening to rap music and getting high.*

*You never cared what the others thought of you. You wore sandals in the snow, walked the six blocks to school, showed off your thin collar bone, screamed in the middle of the damn hallway.*

*It hit me, when I heard that you passed. I found myself crying, head bent over my diary, writing line after line in a poem.*

*I called it "Fallen Angel." An ode to a girl I never knew.*

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