

## SADNESS FOR BEGINNERS

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Begin new game? (Y/N)

>y

At 6:18, you unceremoniously fall out of your bed. Struggling to untangle yourself from your comforter, you realize that you have twelve minutes before your alarm goes off.

Screw it. There's no way you're getting back to sleep. For a few moments, you thought all the pressure had gone away, but as you stumble to your feet, you can feel that fogginess in your head start to reestablish itself. It occurs to you that this is not a phase anymore. This is an actual thing that you are having an actual problem with, and maybe you should actually do something about it. You should probably **SHOWER** first, though. God, you're a mess.

>take shower

You throw on the first pair of jeans and t-shirt you can find. Your parents say you should clean your room more often, but you don't have the heart to tell them that your entire organizational style is based on scattering small mounds of clothes everywhere. And besides, you use your **CLOSET** for other things. But you'd rather not think about that right now. Your parents are probably eating breakfast **DOWNSTAIRS**.

>look in closet

Not right now. You'll have time after school. Your parents work pretty late, so you mostly have the place to yourself in the evening. Not that you mind. You grab your **CELL PHONE** and a silver **KEY** from their places on your nightstand.

>go downstairs

Your **MOM** is leaning against the counter, nursing a glass of orange juice.

"You're up early," she says, somewhere between surprise and sarcasm.

"Fell out of bed," you mumble. You walk towards the fridge. You can feel her staring at the back of your head. You pause while you rummage in the crisper. *Any minute now*, you think, *Just ask the question*. As you assemble your sandwich, she turns the other way, silent. You're hurt, but you know you shouldn't be.

>talk to mom

You give her another chance to talk. "What is it, Mom?"

She momentarily gets that deer-in-headlights look.

"Nothing, Jeremy. Just tired. We've had a long week, haven't we?"

She has no idea. You've tried telling her, of course. About the fogginess, and how even little things are slowly getting harder. How you're not sure how you got this way. It failed spectacularly.

"Jeremy, everybody gets a little sad sometimes," she had sighed. "You dwell on things too much. Just wait a little longer and you'll be fine."

She found the bottle of pills in your **BACKPACK** two days later. In a strange way, you were almost relieved. But instead of talking to you about it, she just disposed of the pills and acted like it never happened.

"Your father's at work," she tells you, "and I'm going to be late again. You know how the holidays are at the mall." Your mother works at the perfume counter. You've heard she's a warrior with a perfume spritzer in her hand, but now she just looks worn out, like she's trying to muster enthusiasm that just isn't there.

You don't say a word. Instead, you find a Ziploc bag for your sandwich. You hear her go back into the master bedroom and shut the door. You realize that you have no idea where your **BACKPACK** is. It's probably in the **FRONT HALLWAY** or in the **LIVING ROOM**.

>look in living room

Your backpack isn't beside the couch, where you usually deposit it. An infomercial is blasting from the television. A smiling blonde woman is feeding paper chains into a white contraption. Shredded bits of paper emerge from the bottom, spewing into a large plastic bin below. Your dad must have left the television on. He usually watches the morning news from his **RECLINER** before he goes to work.

>look at recliner

Dad's recliner is massive. When you were little, you were convinced that it could devour you. It has those amazing cushions that let you sink into them if you sit down. You reach between the cushions. This is where expensive

electronics, important business documents, and pennies end up. You find the **TELEVISION REMOTE** and a **BUSINESS CARD**.

>use remote on television

The smiling blonde woman throws the shredded paper into the air before the television is silenced. The living room is much darker now. You set the remote on an arm of the couch.

>take business card

You slip the business card into your back pocket.

>go to front hallway

Your backpack sits next to the coat rack. The zipper was left slightly open. All too conveniently, your mom emerges from the master bedroom.

"Jeremy?"

"Yes," you call back. *This is it. Just say something.*

"Have a nice day at school." And even that sounds like it takes too much effort.

>go to school

In first-period Biology, you slice open frogs. You're partnered with **JANICE HERBERT** again, but this is nothing new. Both of you are quiet and somewhat aloof. Both of you don't play well with others.

>talk to janice herbert

"We have that project due," she tells you, "We should start working on it soon."

"Yes," you say. "Maybe sometime this week." You only halfway mean it. You make a clean cut down the frog's belly with the scalpel.

"How do you keep it so straight?" Janice asks.

You shrug. "Practice."

You notice Janice staring. When she thinks you're not looking in fourth period Spanish, when she sits behind you in seventh period History—no subject is sacred. Not even that Physics class she loves so much. For God's sake, it isn't even a come-hither stare.

After an eternity, the final bell rings. You sigh with relief. For once in your life, you're ready to go **HOME**.

"See you tomorrow," Janice calls.

You don't answer. Tomorrow suddenly seems irrelevant.

>go home

You're hungry as soon as you close the front door. Your parents always leave a microwaveable dinner in the fridge. When you see it lying uselessly on the second shelf, a small part of you dies inside.

You consider starting your **HOMEWORK**—in fact, you know you should be starting your homework—but even that seems sad and pointless. You know that somewhere, Janice Herbert is staring at you.

>look at homework

What a mess. Your algebra assignment looks like the love child of Mad Libs and Sudoku. You try to decipher the

jumble of variables and isosceles triangles to no avail. You decide that Algebra can wait. You arrange your homework neatly. When Mom comes in, she'll see it and assume that you're being studious. Dad won't see it. If it isn't between the front door and the recliner, he usually doesn't notice. The only things that hold his attention are stock market tickers and The Economist. It must be a side effect of working at an investment firm.

>check back pocket

You check your back pocket. You pull your **CELL PHONE** out and place it on the table. It's a really old model, but it's built like a tank. It accidentally fell while you were changing the school marquee two weeks ago. Ever since then, you've gotten really good reception. Another victory for hitting things when they're broken.

Your phone can only store 25 contacts at a time, so you've had to prioritize over the years. Your parents, distant relatives, maybe even a classmate or two—that's as far as your address book goes.

You also find the **BUSINESS CARD** that was stuck in the recliner this morning. It's a bit crumpled from being under a cell-phone shaped brick all afternoon.

>look at business card

"Doris Keebler Law Firm," the card says. "Fighting for your custody rights!" Doris has wedged her contact information underneath hideous, judicial-themed clip art.

A slow unease builds in the pit of your stomach. Your parents have always been somewhat distant, but you never thought the distance would go this far. You were always able to keep them in check before. Now it's different. If your parents turn away from you, it would only make sense that they'd turn away from each other, too.

>check front pockets

You clutch a tiny, silver **KEY**. It's gotten to the point where you keep this key on you at all times. It reminds you that there's always a way out if things become too hard to handle.

For the second time today, you remember what you have stashed in your **CLOSET**. Maybe it's time to drop this charade once and for all.

>go upstairs

You glance at the clock. It's only 4:15. You have roughly two hours before your mother gets home. You reflexively put your **CELL PHONE** in your back pocket. Mom gets paranoid if you don't pick up when she calls.

You take the stairs two at a time. Your room looks the same as it did this morning—piles of clothes in all directions. The sliding door to your **CLOSET** is partly open out of necessity. If you close the sliding door, the latch automatically locks. It makes you think that the last owner of this house was slightly paranoid.

> go in closet

You slip inside and turn on the light. It's one of those weird energy saving light bulbs so it makes everything look pale and washed out.

You make sure the **KEY** is still in your pocket before you take a deep breath and close the sliding door behind you. The only way out is to slide the key underneath and hope that someone will notice.

Not that it matters. You don't plan on leaving.

That invisible weight presses on you from all sides. You walk over to your sock drawer and pull out the 4-pack of Gillette razor blades that your dad brought home from the grocery store.

"Need to shave," he had grunted at you before shuffling towards the recliner.

You doubted that the faint stubble on your chin required four blades, but you took it up to your room.

You remove one from the plastic casing. In the weird incandescent light, the underside of your arm looks like a frog's belly. One straight cut. That's all it would take. Your back pocket buzzes. You jump and send the first razor blade skittering across the carpet. You fumble for your **CELL PHONE** before it cuts to voicemail.

>answer cell phone

"Hello?" Your voice sounds thick and raspy.

"Um, hi. It's Janice. We have that group project for Civics class due in a week or so. I was going to ask you if you were doing anything this afternoon once school let out, but you looked like you were in a hurry."

"I don't think...I don't think this afternoon will work," you mumble.

"You don't sound too good. You've been acting funny lately—is everything okay?"

"No." Your voice cracks before you can stop it.

You can hear Janice exhale. "Don't you dare hang up," she commands. "I'll be right there."

"Okay," you whisper, and you curl up against the wall, listening to the hiss of breath in the receiver.