

Around me, I hear a cacophony. Saxophones tuning, freshmen drummers showing off, laughter, youth. I'm in my high school bandroom. My safe haven from years ago. I'm not safe in second period. I'm bathed in nostalgia, reeking of alumni. My world is pitch black, my eyes are squeezed shut. I'm hiding in plain sight. I'm afraid. No, I'm terrified. Unprepared. I feel something. Not a "thing," but it is there. A shift in the air, a complicated calm. It's him, I know it. It's been over two years since I've seen his face and I'm not ready to see it again. I don't know where the bullet entered, but I know he did enough damage to leave me here alone, carrying both of our weight. It certainly can't be worse than I've imagined. We're not in his driveway, so there's no chance of slipping on brains. I plant my feet on the soft and still unvacuumed carpet that we would sit back to back on, wearing our smiley face masks that we designed together. Family tradition. My imagination doesn't wander as far here. Things are urgent. I don't know what if anything is there of my cousin, but I long so horribly to be with him. Time to be brave. I open my eyes and raise my head, shuddering in fear, totally unprepared to see the damage that he did to himself. Already imagining the destruction of what once was the most beautiful red-bearded face I've ever seen. Things get liminal. My eyes fall on a skinny kid with beaming blue eyes and fiery red hair. Unmistakably Max from 5 years in the past. No big muscles and scarred arms, just the picture of simpler times and innocence. I rush to him and gently put his undamaged head in my hands. Dream Drew doesn't register this as Max by name, but I just KNOW it's him. Tears flow as I tell him that he "looks EXACTLY like someone I know!" He doesn't question my disconnect in identity. He gets it. He gets me. I briefly ponder my choice in vocabulary of my first sentence spoken. Know? Knew? Emotions crash my train of thought and I continue marveling at this beautiful, beardless face. I am so overwhelmed. No anger bubbles in me, just a determination to get the answers I deserve. Words leave me as he meets my frantic, teary eyes with his. Unwavering and full of pure love. The longing for answers sinks back into my pockets. I take in this moment and want to stay in it forever. I think that I would like to never wake up again. He reads my mind and his stare tells me that he's not ready for me to stay with him. He wants to speak. Why isn't he speaking? I'm getting concerned. I'm slapped back into the reality that he is a pile of ashes on his mother's bedside table. My body shakes as I sob, my knees weakening and my face crumpling. But I dare not let go of his soft cheeks, my fingertips resting in his hair. He watches me with a stillness and strength that I cannot understand. Our eyes meet and he speaks his first and only words in this world we're able to share. "It's okay." It seems that's all he has to offer, and it's more than I could've ever asked for. I feel a gentle wash of comfort that softens my cries and straightens my spine. Max turns and walks away. The door to the bandroom is propped open, letting in a stunning orange sunset. He blends into it. The further he walks, the more the dream falls apart. I awake from the dream, bringing with me only my tears and a heavy heart.