

HALF LIVES

half-life:

- 1: the time required for half of something to undergo a process: as
 - a: the time required for half of the atoms of a radioactive substance to become disintegrated
 - b: the time required for half the amount of a substance (as a drug, radioactive tracer, or pesticide) in or introduced into a living system or ecosystem to be eliminated or disintegrated by natural processes
- 2: a period of usefulness or popularity preceding decline or obsolescence

—*Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*, 11th ed.

ONE

If you'd asked me that day whether I could lie, cheat, steal, and kill, I would have said ab-so-lutely not. I've told little white lies to my parents to stay out of trouble. And, sure, I borrowed a few answers off Lola on that one chemistry test. (Who cares that *U* stands for Uranium or that it's number 92 on the periodic table of the elements?) I shop-lifted a Kit Kat when I was seven on a dare. That's not exactly grand larceny, but I'd never kill. *Not possible*. I'd relocate spiders rather than squash them. (And I hate those beasties!)

But now I've knowingly and willfully committed all those acts on the Richter scale of freaking horrible—

from lying to killing. I'm not proud of it. I learned that surviving isn't all it's cracked up to be. If you survive, you've got to live with the guilt, and that's more difficult than looking someone in the eye and pulling the trigger. Trust me. I've done both. Killing takes a twitch of the finger. Absolution takes several lifetimes.



When the final bell rang that last normal day of my life, I found Lola reclining next to our open locker, applying my Candy Corn Crush lip gloss with her pinky. Even in the Friday afternoon stampede, students and teachers steered clear of Lola as if she projected her own force field. With her combat boots and torn fishnets, the whole military-Goth thing she had going on could be kind of intimidating. But she was like a Tootsie Pop—hard on the outside but sweet and weirdly awesome on the inside.

“That bad, huh?” Lola asked the moment she spotted me.

“Bad would be an improvement,” I replied, and stuffed my books in our locker.

On a scale of 1 to 10, where 1 equals “dumped by your boyfriend of three and a quarter months via text two weeks before senior prom” and 10 equals “winning a reality TV show and being insta-famous,” my day was a big, ginormous 1.

Literally. Yep. Tristan ended our romance with a text:

I wan 2 brk up.

That's what he wrote. Didn't even bother with real words.

In my seventeen years, I'd learned that, no matter how heinous your life is, stay tuned for a *Psycho*-style surprise before the credits roll. And whatever higher power you worship—God, Jesus, Allah, Buddha, Zeus, or Lady Gaga—can't save you from the dull, rusty knife.

“So...” Lola looked me up and down, admiring my standard uniform of smart-ass T-shirt (today's: a smiley face with HAVE A MEDIOCRE DAY), cargo pants, and flip-flops. “You need a diversion. What should we do?”

I draped my messenger bag across my torso, tugging my dreadlocks free from the strap. “Starbucks?”

She shook her head. “Already shotgunned two Red Bulls to get through English.”

“Movie? That theater down by that one place is showing Hitchcock—”

She raised her hand to interrupt. “Um, that's one of those black-and-white ones, right?”

I nodded.

She waved the idea away. “That's like playing a board game when you've got a Wii.”

“But the man knows freepy.”

“Freepy. I like that—freaking creepy.” She fished the phone out of her faux military jacket and immediately started tweeting. “You have a gift,” she said. Lo and I liked to create what we called “the Ripple”—not as in raspberry or caramel fudge—but a ripple of words.

Someone had been the first to utter *whatever* or *crupid*. My dad still periodically, and completely cringeworthy, said *dude*. It was Lola's and my mission to take our linguistic

influence global. We'd come close with *borriffic*—terrifically boring. I'd proclaimed Mr. Kramer's third lecture on WWII *borriffic*. A day later I heard some freshman using it in the cafeteria, and three weeks after that one of Lola's friends' friends used the word on Facebook.

"I give it two days before Teek and Jackson are using it as if it were one of *Webster's* own." Lola's fingers feverishly tapped her phone.

"Monument?" I suggested after she'd tweeted our newest Ripple. I loved D.C.'s morbid décor. I could barely flip my dreads without swatting some monument to dead people. We sometimes picked a D.C. landmark and saw how many tourists' snaps we could sneak into, or we would pretend to be tour guides and feed visitors false info: *Many people don't know this, but the Washington Monument is named for President George Washington's father and shaped like his unnaturally pointy head.*

"Nah. Too much effort." Lola looped her arm through mine and practically dragged me off school premises. "Mall," she decided. Our mecca. "You need a little retail therapy."

Once we'd outpaced all the other Capital Academy refugees, I confessed, "Tristan dumped me." Saying it was like reliving the dumpage all over again. He was my first serious boyfriend and what Lola and I called the trifecta of Gs—gorgeous, geek, and giggle. He was equal parts good looks, smarts, and sense of humor, and that was a next-to-impossible combo. I wasn't going to marry him or anything, but I thought we might at least make it to graduation.

She wrapped me in a too-tight hug. “Icie, I’m soooooo sorry.”

I wiggled free. “What a...” I felt the pre-sob throat clench. I wasn’t going to lose it. “I mean he’s a total...”

Lola squinted and puckered her lips as if she was thinking, then a wicked smile tugged at the corners of her mouth. “Totass.”

It took me a second to dissect the word. “Jerzilla.”

“Dumboid.” She laughed and then glanced at me to make sure it was okay to laugh when my heart had been pulverized like a grande coffee frap hold the whip.

I smiled. “Fridiot.”

“Yep, Tristan is the biggest fridiot in D.C.”

“America.”

“The world.”

“Universe.”

“Galaxy.”

We exploded with laughter. We leaned on each other to steady ourselves. Tears streamed down my cheeks. My sides ached. Our laughter dwindled to sighs. My attitude shifted a smidge. With Lola as my life support, I no longer felt like I was going to die.

As we walked, Lola lit the cigarette she kept stashed in her bra. Even though she turned away to exhale, the cigarette smoke seemed to curl around me. I moved away to find fresh air and wished ditching Tristan’s toxicity would be as easy. But his rejection clung to me like smoke. Why did he dump me? Was I so...so...But I couldn’t find the

right combo—ugly and disgusting? Stupid and revolting? I was never getting a date to prom now.

Lola paused and ground her cigarette into the sidewalk. She shifted all her weight onto the ball of her foot and shredded the stub.

“What’s up?” I asked.

“Nothing.”

“Nothing?” I nodded toward the cigarette confetti on the sidewalk.

She started walking. “I don’t know if I should tell you.”

“What?” I grabbed her arm and forced her to stop. I felt a hiccup of panic.

She wouldn’t look at me. “Guess you’ll find out sooner or later.”

“What?” I asked again. The worst thing was not knowing, right?

“The fridiot already posted your breakup on Facebook with one of those winking smiley faces.” She patted herself down, searching for another emergency cig. “Teek saw it and told Will, who told Tawn, who told me.”

The gossip Ripple was way more powerful than the word Ripple.

Social death by Facebook. I take it back. Knowledge can suck.

I started walking, stomping really, in the general direction of the Metro. My life at Capital Academy was over. I fished out my phone from my cargo pants pocket. I tapped the FB app. My profile picture of Tristan and me stared back. It was taken on our seventh-and-a-half date. (Our first

date only counted as half because he didn't take me to the dance, but we left together.) The picture was snapped after we'd seen a double feature of *American Psycho* and the original Hitchcock *Psycho*. He's pretending to stab me in the back with an imaginary knife and I'm mock-screaming in horror. A bit prophetic.

I changed my Facebook status to single and switched my picture to one of Lo and me last summer. We're trying on three-hundred-dollar sunglasses in this snooty boutique, right before the saleslady with the awful orange fake tan kicked us out. I was trying to think of the perfect snarky thing to post about Tristan when Lola caught up to me.

"Listen," she said. "Some things are just not meant to be."

Yeah, but how did you know? What if Tristan and I *were* meant to be? Maybe there was no such thing as meant to be, only shit happens and you make the best of it.

We stopped at the Metro entrance to consult our phones before we went underground. I scrolled through Twitter. Lola had, like, a thousand followers. #Freepy was already multiplying.

I checked Facebook again. Molly "Ho" Andersen had just "liked" Tristan's breakup post. She was such a... As my mind strained for the perfect combo-word, my phone buzzed and my dad's photo flashed on the screen. I'd programmed his ringtone to be the screeching noise from the shower scene in *Psycho*. I ignored it. I needed a proper sulk. I wasn't ready for Dad's platitudes: "Everything happens for a reason" or "See it as an opportunity." I didn't want to "make the best of it" yet.

Before I could put my phone away, those ominous notes from the movie *Jaws* played over and over. A text from Mum. I didn't need the "suck it up you're a Murray" lecture. "Stiff upper lip." "Brave face." "Chin up." "Keep calm and carry on." All that stoic British shit. I'd been dumped and I was entitled to feel like moldy gum on the bottom of last season's stilettos. I shoved the phone into my cargo pants pocket, double-checking that it wasn't the one with the hole. I'd lost about twenty dollars that way.

The telephonic harassment didn't relent. My pants sounded like a horror movie soundtrack. I dug the phone out and flicked to the text messages. They all said the same thing.

911 COME HOME ASAP.

Yeah, we'd come up with that oh-so-difficult-to-decipher code; 911 before any message meant an emergency for real. What family had a secret emergency code? Answer: a family whose mum worked for the federal government and whose dad was a nuclear physicist. We got one of those Barbie-posed, all-purpose holiday cards from the White House, and the president actually signed ours.

Mum and Dad were always getting threats from some activists who were a few crayons short of a sixty-four-pack—if you know what I mean. Mum assured me the threats were no big deal, but we'd still come up with our top secret code.

When I saw the 911 texts, my stomach dropped like it did when I rode Mega Coaster Rama at Flying Flags America. I'd only gotten one 911 from my parents ever, when Dad had his car accident. That message had said:

911 D.C. Mercy Hospital.

“I gotta go,” I said to Lola. Suddenly, being dumped by fridiot Tristan didn’t matter as much.

Lola paused her texting. “Seriously, Icie?”

“Sorry, Lo,” I said with a shrug. “My parents have evoked the code. I’ll call you later.”

“It’s going to be okay,” Lola said, hugging me good-bye. “We will either get you another date for prom or you can stay home with me and we’ll eat tubes of chocolate-chip cookie dough and watch classic horror movies until we vomit.”

“Can I wear my prom dress and killer purple shoes?” I tried to joke. If I could make a joke, then things couldn’t be that bad.

“Definitely.”

“Later!” I called as I waved down a yellow taxi and texted my parents that I was:

ON MY WAY!



By the time the taxi pulled up in front of our three-story brownstone, I’d talked myself down from the ledge of worry my parents’ texts had pushed me toward. Everything looked normal. Flames weren’t shooting from our bedroom windows. The street was ambulance- and police-free. I relaxed a little. It couldn’t be too terrible if the sun was still filtering through the trees that lined our street and flashing on the tinted windows of the BMWs, Jaguars, and Lexuses parked in a neat row. The nannies for the Smith-Wellses

and the Pattersons chatted over strollers with sleeping toddlers. Mrs. Neusbaum in wedge heels that matched her helmet of snow-white hair clip-clopped after her pug, Sir Milo Winterbottom.

I stuffed twenty dollars through the taxi's payment slot and told the driver to keep the change. I climbed the steps to my house two at a time. The door swung open before I reached the top, and Mum pushed past me.

"Wait! Stop!" she shouted at the taxi.

Dad was slumped against the banister in the entryway. "Dad, what's going on?" I asked, and stepped inside. He didn't answer.

The backpack my parents bought for my one and only camping trip was resting at his feet. My SAVE THE PLANET, ROCK THE WORLD button was fastened to the front pocket. The last I remembered, my backpack was stuffed under my bed, and my parents adhered to the progressive parents' handbook and never, ever trespassed in my bedroom.

I scanned from my backpack past Dad's wrinkled khakis and polo to his face. His eyes were red and puffy, and his normally carefully brushed hair looked like he'd had a mishap with hair wax and a pack of wildcats.

"Dad?" My pinprick of worry was now a full-on jugular vein gush.

He wouldn't look at me.

"Dad, what is it? What's the matter?" I asked. My legs turned to rubber. I had to steady myself on the hall table, which caused a vase of white roses to wobble and a pile of mail to avalanche to our recently refinished mahogany

floor. Neither Dad nor I made a move to stop the cascade of papers. The slick, glossy cover of Mum's *Modern Politics* mixed uneasily with the dull recycled pages of Dad's *Nuclear Energy Digest*.

Mum burst in. "Okay, the cab's sorted." She shut the door behind her. "Have you told her, Jack?" She looked from Dad to me and back again, tennis-match style. "No, clearly not."

This was the first time I'd seen my parents in the same room in about a month. Dad was a morning person, so he made me homemade granola with fresh blueberries every day for breakfast—because it was my favorite. Mum was the queen of the night, so she checked my homework after the ten o'clock news with a reward of Ben & Jerry's and whatever film was on the Horror Channel. We used to cross paths at dinner, but for the last few months our daily family time had slipped.

"Icie." Mum paused, and it was like watching the battery drain from a toy robot. Her voice and posture softened. "We need to leave D.C."

Dad handed me my backpack. I pushed it away. "Now?" I asked.

"Yes." She pressed an imaginary wrinkle from her skirt. I noticed the transfer of sweat from her palms to the black silk. "Please give me your phone." She held out her hand.

I protectively covered my cargo pants pocket. "But I need it to—" Mum flashed "Talk to the hand" before I could prioritize why I so desperately needed my iPhone: (1) to update Facebook, (2) to text Lola, (3) to listen to the playlists

Lola and I had created, with titles like “Wake Up ’n’ Smell the Urine,” “Songs to Slit Your Wrists By,” and “Make-Out Mix (Virginity Blues).”

The look on her face told me that none of that was important anymore. I handed her my phone. She switched it off and laid it on the hall table. She smoothed a lock of hair that had escaped from the blonde uni-curl she called a bob. “This is serious, Icie. We need to go someplace safe,” Mum continued, as if she hadn’t just unplugged me from my life.

“What’s going on, Mum?” I asked again. “You’re scaring me.”

“We need to get moving,” Mum sort of barked.

“Mum, just because you’re British doesn’t make you, like, Jasmine Bond.” I laughed nervously. My parents didn’t.

“Jack, give her the money belt,” Mum said, indicating the three-inch-wide beige cloth that lay coiled on the stairs. Dad didn’t move. He stood there hugging my backpack. “Bloody hell!” Mum grabbed the belt. “There’s ten thousand dollars in here.”

Was it ransom? A bribe? I couldn’t get my head around what was happening. She lifted my T-shirt and wrapped the money belt around me. I was having a total out-of-body experience. Had I hit my head? Traveled to a parallel universe? Eaten some bad Cheetos?

I stood, arms raised, like a two-year-old letting Mummy dress her. She fastened the belt at my spine. The cloth was cool and stiff. She pulled my shirt down and tugged the hem to straighten my smiley-face iron-on. The bricks of cash cinched my waist like a corset.

“Someone tell me what the hell is going on!” I demanded, and backed away, knocking the hall table again. The white roses toppled off. The vase shattered and water splashed on my cargo pants.

Mum took a deep breath. “You’ve got to trust us. We need to get out of here.”

“We’ll get through this, Isis,” Dad said, squeezing me and my backpack together.

Mum pulled him off. “God, Jack, we agreed. Get a grip.”

My brain didn’t know how to process this. There was no combo-word for what I was feeling.

Mum glanced out the window as if she heard someone coming up the sidewalk, which made me look, too. But the scene hadn’t changed from a few minutes ago.

“You and your dad get into the taxi and I’ll get our bags,” Mum said. That’s when I noticed a second backpack and Mum’s big Prada overnighter by the door.

“Come on, Dad,” I said, shouldering my backpack. “It’s going to be okay.” I don’t know why I said it. It clearly didn’t feel true, but it’s what you say, isn’t it? When your life is falling apart, we utter stupid platitudes to make us believe it’s not so bad. When I broke my arm when I was six, falling off the slide at the park, Dad had repeated the same phrase all the way to the hospital.

Now he looked at me with these incredibly sad eyes. “You are so brave.”

It was easy to be brave-ish when I didn’t exactly know what I should be afraid of.

Our home phone rang, making the three of us jump. We

turned toward the phone on the hall table, but none of us made a move to answer it. Mum shuffled through the pile of papers on the floor and pulled out a slightly soggy piece of white paper, spraying drops of water and shattered glass from the vase. She fanned it for a few seconds, drying the wet patches. She studied the now-smudged lines and dots on the page. It looked like some sort of hand-drawn map. She crammed it into the front netting of my backpack.

Mum's volume increased to be heard over the ringing phone. "Let's go." She slung Dad's backpack over one shoulder and clutched her handbag and matching luggage in the other. She looked around as if she had forgotten something.

The phone thankfully stopped ringing. But Dad's cell phone buzzed. He took it from the case clipped to his belt and checked the screen. He and Mum exchanged some coded look. They both switched off their phones and placed them next to mine. What was going on? Mum and Dad without cell phones was like Batman and Robin leaving their utility belts.

And then we all heard it. Sirens in the distance.

Mum opened the door and charged toward the taxi. Dad regained enough composure to snatch his navy blazer from the coatrack and follow me out the front door. We piled into the backseat of the taxi, luggage and all.

"Dulles Airport," Mum told the taxi driver, and slammed the car door. The taxi did a U-turn in the middle of the street.

The sirens were getting closer. Mum and Dad slumped low in the seat.

I opened my mouth to ask a bazillion questions, but Mum shook her head. I understood by the pleading look in her eyes that she needed me to keep quiet and trust her. I pushed back into the seat, wedged awkwardly between my parents.

The sirens were deafening now. Two black SUVs with blue lights on the dashboard blasted past us. I checked the rearview mirror. The SUVs screeched to a stop in front of our house. The taxi driver didn't seem to notice as he aggressively maneuvered around the growing afternoon traffic. What had my parents done? Were we felons fleeing the law?

Mum slipped her hand into mine, and I pried Dad's from his backpack. The sweat from our palms sealed our hands together. They couldn't have committed a crime. This was all some misunderstanding, or the best opening ever to a hidden-camera TV show.

The world looked the same. There was no alien spaceship hovering over the Washington Monument. No mushroom cloud emanating from the direction of the White House. The sky was bright blue, not even a wispy cloud in sight. But everything normal faded away. My life switched from *Glee* to *Drag Me to Hell* in one afternoon.

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