

ELEGY



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*I'm trying my best to not be a dick, really I am  
Why does she even want to meet them?  
Won't the wedding be enough?*

Blair had a habit of yelling when conversations got heated. He wouldn't yell on purpose but his voice would grow obnoxiously loud when he got excited. A news story about a political candidate's scandals riled him up. After the third or fourth time of gesturing for him to quiet down, Emilia, his wife-to-be, flicked on the news to take a break from the conversation.

"The body of Eleven-year-old Thomas Douglas has been found. After several days and nights of looking, a small search party found the boy washed up along Taghum Beach Regional Park. The boy went missing around 5 pm last Wednesday. Police --" The voice of the reporter abruptly changed to a different station. Filling the space in the car with a low-fi music channel, Blair placed his hands on the wheel to take control of the automated car.

"You know I wanted to listen to that..." Emilia mumbled as she glared through the corner of her eye at her noticeably tense fiancé.

The thought of getting in a car crash to avoid this dinner bolted through Blair's mind.

"You okay?" asked Emilia after a few moments of silence. Receiving a shrugged shoulder for an answer, she watched her breath coat the window beside her as she waited for her fiancé to cave and talk. Softer than the hum of the highway, Blair sighed and mumbled towards his lap.

"I just, I hate being back home." He could hardly call it that; every street they passed was burned with memories of being

bullied, picked on or made fun of by anyone who had the chance.

“Plus, I’m looking forward to getting out of this car. My butt has fallen asleep too many times now.” Blair chuckled, hoping to lighten things up after realizing he was being too sour.

Stretching his hand onto Emilia’s leg beside him, the two became distracted by the warm glowing lights strung up between each building -- flickering as snowflakes drifted past them. Plumes of white fluff littered the streets and wouldn’t be shoveled till the next day.

“It is cozy here, hey,” nudged Emilia, savoring the sound of their tires rolling over damp snow. “Being snowed in doesn’t sound too bad out here.”

The sandstone buildings seemed so wimpy compared to the giant buildings that surrounded the couple back home in the city. Thinking of all the strangers that had passed through town, Blair began to imagine their stories. He wondered what it must have been like for the original settlers that came through Nelson, seeing its peaks and valleys for the first time. How many famous writers came here seeking inspiration on their way to the west coast? Blair began to warm up to the scenery of the familiar frozen town. He pointed out corner stores that sold cherries and peaches in the summer and the beaches where he spent countless hours with his metal detector as a teen. Every house they passed glowed with light from Christmas trees or digital fireplaces. Each one beamed with warmth, all except the house towards the end of the block. Pulling up to the dark two-story house, Blair set the car to autopilot so that he wouldn’t have to listen to his wife’s ridicule as he attempted to parallel park.

“We must have beat everyone. I always forget how quick it is to get here,” Blair said as the two exited the car and started walking towards the front door. Decorated with a synthetic plastic wreath and chipped paint, the front door opened with a tap of Blair’s smartphone. The lights inside came pouring out, pulling the two inside with their artificial warmth. The smell of Christmas dinner wafted towards them from the kitchen; butternut squash soup,

turkey with all its fixings, and three different kinds of pies floated around the empty house.

“I always imagined the staircase on the left side from the stories you’ve told. I should get the full tour so I can see what else I got wrong.” Emilia said as she began to stroll through the house that Blair had built so many memories in.

Each step felt the same as the last time he walked through the halls. Knowing that he could close his eyes and still know how to get to any bathroom brought a strange comfort to Blair. Dancing from one side of the hallway to the other, the floorboards were sturdy and heavy under Blair’s feet.

Creaky, bent boards whined under Emilia’s wool socks as she looked at the pictures on the walls, noticing the trails of dust that lined the moldings, it was clear to Emilia that the house was always empty during the winter. Blair’s parents migrated south to warmer weather like birds. To Blair, the empty nest felt like a shell, not quite as big as he once thought. As Blair lingered in the hall, Emilia was drawn to a small blackboard outside a bedroom that spelled out *Blair’s Room* in smudged chalk.

“Ever bring any girls up here?” she asked in a flirty tone standing in the hallway, causing Blair to blush from a mix of embarrassment and excitement.

With the hope of fulfilling his hormone-fueled teenage dreams, he looked to her and said, “You’ll be the first.”

Placing his hand on the small of her back, he lead her into the dark room, stumbling into the darkness searching for a light switch. Blinded by the LED bulbs after finding the switch, the idea of fooling around in his old room got replaced with a different kind of disappointment.

“Storage? Really? Of course, put your shit in my old room, not the empty unfinished basement.” A small sigh echoed from the doorway. Walking over to Blair, Emilia rested her head on his arm, wrapping her arms around his chest and lightly squeezing.

“If it makes you feel better, my parents made my room into a personal gym.” She said squeezing a bit tighter. “They sold most of

my stuff on the internet to weirdos who would buy it.” The mix of brown cardboard boxes, spare blankets, and Halloween decorations covered the space that Blair grew up in -- the space that Blair made blanket forts, watched movies late at night and ate sour candies in till his mouth felt raw. The space had become something else: a place to put junk that was too good to throw away. A giggle erupted from Emilia across the room as she explored the boxes, leaning over to grab a pair of clear framed glasses. The digital frames, once a technological marvel, now an outdated gadget slid down her nose as she put on her best impersonation of Blair.

“Spot on, Em,” he said sarcastically while grinning at his wife-to-be. His dad’s old glasses suited her.

As he watched her pull out her phone, Emilia grinned back at Blair and said, “Now... let’s see some pictures.”

As Emilia’s phone synced to the glasses, retrieving forgotten memories, Blair attempted to navigate through the labyrinth of junk, his palms growing sweaty. Emilia’s expression became captivated with love, soft Ooh’s and Ah’s came from the corners of her smile.

“You were such a little dork, was this your ‘I’m not cutting my hair phase?’” Scrolling through the photos on the inside screen of the lenses, a picture of a much younger Blair caught her attention.

“Who’s this with you?” she asked while already figuring the answer.

“Dark brown hair, green eyes, paler than normal skin?” asked Blair in response, “That’d be Alec.”

*Everyone said digital bullying replaced physically bullying  
I'd disagree  
The scars on the back of my scalp are enough proof for me.  
But is it still real if you have no physical proof?*

Rising up from his stomach, Blair’s heartbeat climbed from his chest into his ears. He needed to escape from the hallways of

chipped paint and glossy lockers that filled his junior high. Backed into a corner, against the emergency doors, tears came streaming out from his eyes while his voice locked behind his clenched teeth muffled his scream. He knew that his dash to freedom through the emergency exit doors would set off all the alarms, but it was worth the risk at that point. As he ran through the doors -- echoing sirens blasting behind him, bolting through the landscaped football field -- Blair was a buck in hunting season. He felt like a Gazelle with his feet laced into high top sneakers as he tossed himself into the nearby woods for cover -- not quite as graceful or fast but able to get away from his predators. Catching his breath once he knew he was out of sight, he sunk into the moss-covered logs and combed his fingers through what remained of his shaggy locks curled on the back of his neck. Like the pine needles coated in heavy dew that surrounded him, each lock of hair dripped with sweat, tinged a coppery pink from blood.

“Charismatic fuckers!” Blair said to himself, making sure there was no one nearby who could hear him. Sneaking pocket knives into school was a breeze for the boys who had perfect grades; the boys with perfect track records and whose parents had the perfect amount of wealth to toss around. Flipping the hood of his jacket up while trying to calm himself down from his panicked state, Blair wiped the dirt from his pants and the tears and snot from his upper lip. Kicking branches from his feet on his retreat back to the main road, he traced his steps through a path he’d made too many times before. Blair found comfort in how well he knew the forest around him. He could close his eyes and know where to plant his feet between the ferns and saplings. A loud crack between the low branches broke his sense of safety that was hovering between the trees. After turning towards the noise and fearing what he might see, a wave of reprieve flushed through his rosy cheeks.

“Blair! Dude, what are you doing way out --” pulling his hood from his head, Alec paused. “That’s not blood is it?” Alec’s fingers curled into his palms as he got closer to see. “Lemme help you,” he offered.

Pulling his hood back over his wounds Blair snapped at Alec, "I'm fine, just leave me alone," before stomping towards the route to his house.

"Fine, don't let me help you. But you know they'll get mad if you come home this early. Even if they're not there they'll get a notification on their phones. They'll rush home and find you locked behind your bedroom door."

Blair grumbled to himself, glaring at Alec as he tried to look for a counter-argument. He couldn't recall a time that Alec was ever wrong.

Growing up together Blair always compared himself to Alec. Alec's hair was always trimmed and coiffed, there was never a sign of a pimple on him. Alec never got into any trouble, mainly because he didn't do the stupid shit that Blair did.

"So what's my alternative? Go back to class, get detention for setting off the alarms, run into those assholes again? I'll pass." Swatting off bark from the trees with a flimsy stick, tufts of hair peeked out from under Blair's hood with each swoosh of his arm. The crash of Blair's stick smacked with another branch.

"I never said you had to go back," Alec replied while snapping off a branch from a nearby tree, holding it out like a sword towards Blair.

A duel erupted between the two boys, swatting and chasing each other through the woods. The distance between Blair, his home, and school, got further and further with each advance. Dueling through the woods, Blair felt he could do anything he wanted with his pal alongside, even without the modifications the other kids got when their moms were still pregnant. Blair resented his parents for deciding to raise him without modifications, convinced that was the source of all his problems. Yet, his stubbornness would have stuck whether his parents went through with the mods or not.

Blair's eyes beamed with excitement as their duel brought them into a vacant lumber yard. Staring at the giant tower of logs Blair looked to Alec and said, "How far up there do you think I could make it?" rather than asking; he knew that Alec would try to

convince him not to scale the towering stack of logs piled along the shore of the river. Not waiting for an answer, Blair dashed to the tower and began his ascent before his best friend could say anything.

“Cut it out, Blair, you freaking dink. You’re going to get us in trouble!” Alec yelled from a few rows behind, struggling to figure out which spot to place his footing.

“There aren’t any trespassing signs! No one’s here, we won’t get caught or nothing -- hurry up!” called Blair while glancing back at Alec, who was licking his upper lip and furrowing his brow while trying his best to keep up.

The soles of Blair’s shoes were as smooth as the surface of the river as he planted his step at the second log to the top. Blair rolled his shoulder back to yell towards Alec, taunting him he called back, “Last one up...”

Cut off by the shifting, booming logs, Blair’s footing fell from below him. Scampering up to the top of the stack of the rolling logs, he glanced back to see the tower of lumber filling the river and giant waves turn into ripples. A wave of fear drenched Blair, he wasn’t sure whether it’d be scarier to not be able to see his friend or to find him.

*“That’s an interesting story honey, but is it the truth?”*

“They’re here, do I look alright? I wish I would have worn that other sweater, it makes me look like I come from a rich family.” Pulling stray cat hairs from her black jeans, Emilia stared at Blair waiting for an answer. After she nudged his arm, Blair blinked twice and answered with a dopey smile.

“You look great, Hun, relax,” he reassured her “Deep breath.. ready?”

Before Emilia could say no, voices echoed through the house from the front door. The mudroom filled with family, each with simple names Emilia was bound to forget. Even Blair had difficulty remembering these names at the easiest of times. After all the hugs,

handshakes, and introductions were made, Emilia felt assured that she didn't have to worry about much here on out -- except that she could have worn a pair of pants with an elastic waistband. Scattered around the kitchen island, Grandmas, mothers, and aunts awed at Emilia's engagement ring. Drowning in small talk Blair checked his watch, waiting for dinner to be ready so he could fill his mouth with mashed potatoes instead of talking about shitty weather.

"I bet Blair never told you about how much he used to hate kale? Now he can't get enough of it, Mr. Paleo over here. You know he used to be such a picky eater! He used to stash peanut butter under his bed so he could have midnight snacks when he'd refuse to eat his dinner!" The dining room erupted in laughter.

Before Blair's Mom began to tell yet another embarrassing story, Blair's uncle -- who had a very low tolerance to brandy -- chimed in with, "Least he doesn't run off with imaginary friends anymore, Eh?"

The wheezing laughter faded into the sound of forks and knives scraping plates and the smacking of chewing. After all this time, Blair had thought that everyone knew not to make that joke. Holding his tongue, Blair nudged Emilia's foot under the table -- their cue to clear their plates and ditch the festivities. Rising from their seats and walking into the kitchen, Blair's dad, Ted, convinced the couple to stay.

"For dessert, and for your mom's sake," he pleaded.

Sitting in the dining room, the tension lifted as one of the children at the end of the room belched, causing everyone to roll their eyes and giggle to themselves. Lounging around the glowing digital fireplace, Blair's family settled into the couch. Filled with pie, and a three-course meal, eyelids began to weaken and belts began to loosen. After every in-law and relative had left, Blair and Ted sat in the living room to play a game of chess while Emilia and Monica discussed plans for the wedding in the summer.

"Do you have Alec's number or email?" Emilia asked her future mother-in-law. "I'd love to meet him and for him to come to the wedding, but Blair keeps forgetting to invite him."

Met with a raised eyebrow and a laugh, as if Emilia's question was a joke with no punchline, Monica tilted her head towards Emilia the same way teachers do when they catch a student cheating on a test.

"Emilia..." Monica sighed as she searched for a way to let Emilia's hopes down easy,

"Alec won't answer any phone calls, emails, squat. He won't be coming to no wedding, I wish I could have told you earlier but you know Blair, so stubborn. You ought to ask him why he was so upset earlier -- about that imaginary friend thing. It'll all make sense once he fesses up to you."

Holding her head higher than the roof beams, Emilia confronted Monica with a new level of sass she'd never experienced before.

"Oh, he's told me," Emilia barked at Monica. "Saying his best friend growing up was imaginary. I've heard it before and I think it's sick to pick on him like that. The shit he went through as a kid and you guys still mess with him!"

Blair noticed the growing voices in the kitchen and worried that his mother and wife-to-be were in an argument. Wandering into the corner of the room hoping to break the tension, the piercing word "Imaginary" jabbed into Blair's ear like a bot fly that was lost in the dark, looking for warmth.

"Jesus Christ, this is the whole reason I've avoided you guys for so long," Blair said, feeling like a wounded animal, yelling at his mother to survive. "Why I left soon as I turned eighteen, you still don't believe me do you, no one in this fucking town does! All because of you guys." He glared at his family before grabbing his coat and walking to the front door.

"Of course not, Blair, you were twelve! You expect everyone in town to believe a little boy? There was no proof Alec existed, honey. You made him up and that's okay, but you need to accept that!" Monica snapped back at her son.

As Ted slouched out from the living room, Emilia slipped past him and raced up the stairs and back down as fast as she could. Emilia came back down with a set of glasses -- Ted's glasses.

“Bullshit, Monica. If Alec didn’t exist why do you guys have photos of him and Blair?”

*I didn’t tell anyone when no one asked about it and there wasn’t  
a police search  
I believed I was crazy. I sunk so deep did I ever come up again?*

*You always knew this Blair, why are you trying to forget?*

Opting out of later stages of the Genetic Modification Enhancement Program, Ted and Monica had decided to raise their baby traditionally. The way their parents had raised them and their grandparents had raised their parents. The Anti-Vaccine trend had calmed down a few years prior but the couple had found a new way of being trendy. Had Blair been born a generation earlier he’d have been at the top of his class, being involved with sports and making friends would’ve been a breeze. Unfortunately, the competition for Blair was like competing against Greek gods. The parents who opted out of genetic modification for their children were forced into the Guardian Program, allowing children to have foundational bonds in the early stages of their development. “Augmented Life Escort Children,” or ALECs, were made to be role models. They were friends and a voice of reason to kids who didn’t have the advancements that other modified children did. Before memories could be fully formed, the children involved in the ALEC program would receive implants, altering their perceptions and sensations, making them believe the person they grew up with was real. The parents involved also received access to the app, so they could better understand what their child saw through their digital lenses. The ALEC program was a consequence for parents who were irresponsible and negligent about their child’s well being. Like child support, no one bragged or admitted that they or their children were involved in this program. Instead, they resorted to telling the family members, teachers and folks around town that their child simply had an imaginary friend.