

*'A POIGNANT STORY ABOUT  
FRIENDSHIP AND THE PRICE OF  
BREAKING BONDS'*  
**LINDA KASTEN**

# **BLANK SLATE**

A Short Story

— **LALA PALACIO** —



The white, wispy air felt almost tangible, and all Donovan could see in its midst was the gaudy, ominous drain plug. It was the keeper at the center of the inexplicable world he'd stepped into. *His* world.

All he had to do was pull it.

Just a bit.

It was his world; therefore, he knew what it was for—and pulling the drain plug—just a bit—would rid him of pesky memories. Too much pulling and then maybe he'd accidentally forget it all. Or he'd die.

The fall was an accident. He didn't actually want to die—just for things to be different, or to forget. But now, inside a white, foggy world, he still remembered the party five years ago. Now no one would know he'd actually slipped when he'd had every intention of climbing back over the railing.

Yes, Donovan had considered jumping, but he contemplated and did several things he didn't mean. And that fall had landed him here. Inside his brain? Donovan both did and didn't know where he was. *Inside his brain* was too simple an answer. Inside himself dwelled a foggier tone, much like his surroundings. He pictured a nebulous bath, the plug holding all the drops representing all thoughts, words, and deeds, many of which he wanted to suck out.

Physically, he must be in the ICU. Rumbling echoes circled and hovered around him. What was that? He listened intently. Ah, yes, he was right: a lot of medical words he didn't understand. Echo-like voices from the outside world. But deep in his world a different noise slithered close to him.

He took a single, short step toward the drain plug and another voice, not from outside, sliced through the mist.

“Pull it,” came Carmichael’s seething tone.

Donavan had a habit of making sure Carmichael’s food always ended up on his shirt or in his hair during high school. He had been particularly talented when it came to finding nicknames for him. The names stuck to others’ mouths like glue, making Car infamous for something other than his bottle glasses and mountainous nose.

Of course, Car would want him to pull it. Why was he thinking *Car*? He hadn’t used or thought of that poisonless endearment since they’d used boxes to build spaceships as kids. *Carmicheal* had a frostier jab, suiting their mutual hatred.

Donavan took another step.

“What the hell are you doing?” came his mother’s shrill voice. She was crying. Donavan didn’t need to look to his left to see her foggy form wipe away tears while Car kept shouting, “*Pull it.*”

“Don’t you dare!”

The next step was to leave the voices behind, but they followed like a cape, a third one joining in, the form stepping in front of him and blocking the plug’s view. This one wanted his full attention.

Rick threw Donavan’s words back at him. “*It was just a joke.*”

He looked just like he had in school—curly brown hair and baby-faced with far too many freckles. Though he’d seen him in public many times after that, sporting a half-trimmed beard, in his mind, Rick was still that kid from the party.

“Well,” Rick said, competing with Donovan’s mom who kept hollering and Car who shouted repeatedly. “Pull it, dick.”

The form moved out of the way, but Donovan could still feel it staring.

The plug: it was the one holding the memories, loud and proud, where he could hear them. The drain, perhaps, would suck out the bitterness.

Bitterness—that was his memory of Rick. He hated Rick more than anyone. He’d been accepted to the private school on account of previous test scores *and* because his dad was an underpaid teacher. When Donovan’s father had visited the school and found out Donovan was second in his class instead of first, thanks to Scholarship Charity Rick, all hell had broken loose in his house. Rick also had the stupid habit of making snide comments whenever Donovan passed him in the hall with his new friends—*would pass* him in the hall. That was right...high school was over.

Worst of all, if it hadn’t been for Rick, Car and he would still build cardboard spaceships.

*“That’s your fault, Mister-it-was-just-a-joke,”* his own voice jeered.

A plug the size of a dinner table was now only feet away.

*I don’t want to die,* Donovan thought. *Just to forget.* But he had to get away from the voices: to shut them off. Maybe if he just pulled on the plug’s hook a little smidgeon they’d quiet down?

When he reached out to touch it, the voices became a thunderstorm. Many, like Car, screamed at him to pull. Random voices, but many he recognized, nameless nobodies who were friends or friendly with Car or Rick. People he despised and taunted because of it.

*“Shut up,”* he begged.

Donavan tugged slightly, and the crowd's shouts softened as the opening gap swallowed age and remembrance before he plugged it back up. Fewer voices sounded; younger and squeakier. Middle schoolers?

And just when he was about to let go, deciding that was quiet enough, Car's voice boomed.

"I don't want to be friends anymore," young Car said. And those words were needles in Donavan's chest. "Not if you're going to ignore Rick like that. He's my friend, too."

"You're a bully," Rick said in a crackling whisper, like a muffled shout. Had Donavan made Rick cry?

And other voices chanted that word, louder.

He pulled again, leaving a wider opening, telling himself to stop, especially with his mom's heart-wrenching hollers. Yet, there was no way do so when his father spoke.

"I don't want you anywhere around Rick...no, Car is not your friend. He can choose who he wants to be seen with, but no son of mine will hang around drug addicts."

Rick wasn't a drug addict. His mom was—how could that be his fault? But his dad made sure he understood all family was alike in one way or another. Rick would get him in trouble, and Donavan didn't want to be friends with the teacher's kid.

Car hadn't seemed to understand, and as time went on, he had made his choice.

Then, Jayson, who seemed to be maturing faster than the other middle schoolers, spoke with a deeper voice, "Come sit with us! No, just you. No offense."

"You're the kid from the newspaper, right?" one of Jayson's friends asked. "Your dad has that big tech company. My dad works there. Sit."

He didn't like Jayson's tone. He said some other things that day and, Donovan couldn't stand his incessant blabbering. Why didn't he say no? If he had sat with Car and Rick instead, Jayson's exasperating questions wouldn't be burning his ears.

He had to make them stop.

Donovan yanked it for the last time. Voices grew quieter as the ginormous plug sucked most of middle school away. Sounds whooshed the voices and fog right past him. After the voices grew friendlier, he wedged the plug back down.

This was good.

"I'm Rick." The figure stood in front of him again, younger, but just as freckly. "Can I sit with you? I heard...I mean, I wasn't spying, but I did hear you like to build things. Me, too. I'm new and just wanted—"

Donovan heard his younger self laugh but couldn't see him, "Yes. Sit. This is my friend Car. Wanna come over after school?"

Everything was so quiet. So peaceful. They'd stopped shouting *bully* and *pull it*. Car was then asking both Donovan and Rick if they could come over to play in the woods Saturday.

Rick's voice was softer. He told Donovan all the things he liked to do and asked them about their favorite superheroes.

"I won't pull it anymore," he assured his mom whose screams died down. "I just wanted to forget."

But forget what?

"*He's waking up,*" a professional sounding voice said.

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His hand touched something spongy and papery. Donovan winced, the hot, red pain from his head making him nauseous, forcing his hand back down.

Minutes prior he'd been hovering over the canal, drunk, but the height from the bridge sobered him. The canal, about four stories high, had been drained ages ago. He had just stood there in night's shade, staring at the bottomless pit.

The streetlamp's dim, flickering light offered him vague illumination, and though Donovan was breathing, he felt like he'd been drowning. Sounds of a distant party floated in his head, and he kept repeating how sorry he was—that the joke had gone too far. In his mind, he saw Car and Rick's horrified faces and slipped.

Where was he now?

The scent of blood and rub-on alcohol penetrated his nostrils. Without opening his eyes, he knew the lights were way too bright.

“...a concussion. He'll be disoriented, dizzy, and nauseous. We'll run more tests, but everything seems to be fine. Your son will need plenty of rest.”

But Donovan didn't feel fine, and he wasn't referring to the pain in his head. He searched his thoughts, but they were strangely...distant—as if someone emptied them into a hidden reservoir. To his regret, he opened his eyes and scrunched up his face at the brightness.

Donovan had to wake up or else he would be late for the internship. He was still fairly new, but needed to impress Mr. Guinevere, and quickly. The douche already thought the only reason he was there was because of his dad's financial influence.

It wasn't true. His dad was too busy financially influencing the courts to overlook the business scam and scandal, a topic the community buzzed on and on about. Though, Donovan didn't doubt his dad had found some spare time to pull some strings

Donavan knew he had to get out of here, but he couldn't place the *why*.

Why a career in robotics engineering? When had he decided he liked it? Since when did he rush to get places? The annoying voice in his head kept telling him he needed to hurry and get dressed. Shower. Definitely couldn't go with ridiculous bandages on his head. Shave and splash aftershave on his face.

Damn, where was the fire?

He tried to think back before signing up for the internship, but his high school experience escaped him. That time in his life remained hollow and meaningless, as if he had shut his eyes to parts in a horror movie. The last school interaction he recalled took him all the way back to his first days in middle school. The new kid, Rick, had just joined in and he seemed nice. He and Car had become friends quickly, making Donovan like him.

*"I don't think he likes me anymore,"* Rick's voice reverberated in his ears. When or why he'd said that was also void. Gurgles erupted from a distant place before quieting again. And he didn't like the feeling it provoked. Before the void filled with other unwanted thoughts, he forced himself to dwell on other things, like how to get out of this hospital.

He felt his mom's hand in his and turned to look at her. The movement sent spikes of pain to his head, but he smiled and gripped her hand tighter.

Donavan had been leaning over a railing. It hadn't been a long drop, and he was only contemplating. Then, he'd slipped.

What now? Who could come see him? Had his mom called Car or Rick to tell them he'd been hurt? He hardly remembered the last time they spoke, but he knew they had to look different now—older. Donovan pictured their older faces, meaning he'd seen them recently. Yet, none of their recent conversations came to mind. Middle school and high school, he realized, had



been ripped from his thoughts. That was the key, wasn't it? The middle pieces he couldn't remember. The reason he'd been hyperventilating and a topple away from the bottom of the canal. The reason his head really hurt.

"He's fine," the doctor said in a soft, patient voice. "We already looked over the CT results. Although his nap was long, he will still need some more rest."

The doctor said something else about being disoriented. His mom went to the hospital cafeteria to buy him soup, and that's when he hurriedly took out his IV, still dizzy but determined. The tape stung more than taking out the catheter, but from the trickle of blood, he knew he probably did it wrong. Suddenly, he steadied himself on his feet and found his clothes in a bag someone had brought and headed for the door.

Donavan never realized how easy it was to sneak out of a hospital until now. With a scarcity of doctors and nurses roaming the hall, all he had to do was look like he knew where he was going.

Outside the hospital, with the bandage still wrapped around his head, he received concerned and terrified looks, but no one approached him.

Things were still blurry with dispersed thoughts, but after a few minutes of walking, he found himself in the bustling center of town. He knew these streets. And he knew they'd opened a new donut shop about a week ago. Yet, he couldn't recall whom he'd gone with. Had he gone with Car?

He needed to stop calling him Car. He knew his best friend secretly hated the nickname but had grown tolerant of Donavan's using it.

A chill went through him as he passed the railed canal. The concrete shock, the numbness, the growing red in a mere inch of water.

A trickle of memories came back to him. Cloudy voices talked about his being alive. A frantic male voice ordered someone to call emergency services.

What had he been trying to forget before he'd slipped? Whatever it was, his subconscious made his heart race.

In truth, Donovan didn't understand who he was—why he treated his coworkers with such contempt.

Robotics engineering. He was an intern, but climbing fast—mostly due to his own merit. Did he like the job? Something told him he did, but he couldn't recall picking this career path.

When did he go from building cardboard spaceships to actual robots?

And when had he and Donovan begun to swell with an overwhelming snobbishness to where he would only invite the higher ups at the company out for drinks?

He actually liked the lower-ranking coworkers better.

Perhaps it had something to do with how he came to be the sort of guy that leaned over a railing in the dark.

*"It was just a joke!"*

The words pulsed in his ears, but what did it mean? Donovan felt nauseous at the tone, knowing what his lying voice sounded like. What wasn't a joke? Who heard him?

He looked around, observing passersby. Would it be rude to ask if he could use someone's phone? People didn't memorize phone numbers anymore, but he had memorized Car's landline number. A woman close to his mother's age half smiled at him, probably wondering what had happened to his head.

Bravely, Donovan waited until she walked closer.

“Can I borrow your phone?”

The middle-aged, petite woman looked wary, but relented. His fingers moved over the dial effortlessly. If he still remembered Car’s house phone, then they were certainly still close. He’d most likely gone to the donut shop with him.

It rang three times before he heard laughing die down on the other end.

“Hello?”

“Mrs. Carmichael?” Donovan recognized the sweet, deep voice immediately. She hadn’t been the one laughing, but rather shushing whoever was.

“Who might this be?”

“It’s Donovan—is Car there?”

The way he was speaking with her felt bile. Like puppet strings pulling his lips into movement—as if Donovan was supposed to be rather snappy and snooty instead. But this was his best friend’s mom. She had made them matching Halloween costumes in what they swore was their last day of trick-or-treating in fifth grade.

“Why are you calling?” There was definitely something snappy and snooty in the way she spoke.

*Oh, Donny! Yes, I’ll give a shout—Jeff, your friend is on the phone!*

Only Car’s mom and little sister called him Jeff. Donovan had decided Carmichael was much better sounding and had made it his first name instead.

*Donny* was the greeting he’d anticipated. At the same time, deep down, it hadn’t been what he’d expected. As if two versions of this woman were contradicting themselves in his head.

“I—I just wanted to speak with Car.”

There was a sharp silence at the other end. She never shouted for him to come to the phone. Instead, he heard distant hisses before Car's voice finally came on the line.

"Donavan?" Car's voice sounded unsure.

"Car?" Donavan said hurriedly. The way his friend had answered the phone made his blood run cold. Sounds of memories attempting to gush in gurgled louder, but he kept them at bay, brain drained. "I took a hit, and I'm too far to walk home. If I call my mother, she'll just drive me back to the hospital, but I'll be late for the internship."

The same sharp silence from Car's mom returned, "You—is this a joke? Why are you calling *me*?"

The tone was more than distrustful. It was vexed and cutting.

"It's not a joke!" Donavan huffed, growing more anxious from his gaping hole of memories. "Who else did you think I'd call?"

He took so long in answering, he thought Car had hung up. His voice was softer. "You took a hit? Where are you?"

"By the canal near the new donut shop. I slipped off it. I went there with you, right? To the donut shop? I can't remember the last time we hung out. Are you mad at me? Did we fight?"

"I'll drive over," was all Car said.

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Laughter, like cracking diamonds, swirled in his head while he waited for Car. He hated his laugh, but it only ever made Car laugh harder. It was one of the sounds he heard when he thought of the missing piece—he must've laughed a lot in high school.

Maybe Car wasn't his best friend anymore. Maybe he had others, but at least they must still be close friends. A person doesn't just stop being friends with the kid from middle school

after they'd spent so much time hanging out together. Nor does he stop being friends after they'd both spit on their palms, having carved their names into a cool, giant rock they'd both discovered in the woods, and then promptly shook equally slimy hands. Plus, he'd been the only one Car had trusted with his secret anxiety disorder.

He stumbled and sat down. *It was just a joke!*

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Donavan watched a black van slow down, then stop in front of him. Car stepped out. He didn't wear bottle glasses anymore; that much was new. Still, he looked just like the older Car Donavan had pictured in his mind. His messy black hair had not changed. It was about the only thing that was the same since he'd grown into his mountainous nose.

"No joke," Car said, looking at his bandaged head and slightly blood-stained arm.

It was like a supercut of memories—everything they'd ever done together, right back to the day they met (they'd both snuck away from preschool orientation to go to the sandbox), played in his head. He was so glad Car was here. He'd explain everything.

"I don't remember what happened after sixth grade," Donavan said. "Like, I know we graduated, and I like nanotechnology for some reason, but I don't remember the last time we saw each other. You sounded really angry—did we fight?"

Car looked at him like an uncased alien before shaking his head. "Did you pull out the IV? My God, your mom is probably freaking out. Get in the car. We're going back to the hospital."

The way he spoke sounded more like a concerned Good Samaritan than a concerned friend. It made Donavan's panic rise even more.

"But the internship—"

Car grabbed his arm and dragged him to the passenger's seat. "Get in the car, stupid."

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It was bizarre seeing Car drive. He couldn't even recall his studying for the driving test. The vehicle's interior was just like his friend: messy. But in a neat sort of way.

Candy wrappers lay piled in one particular corner, and whatever papers were on the floor had been sort of stacked. He had also added a small pine scent, smelling fairly new, obviously replacing it frequently. Dust bunnies, however, floated aimlessly and free—much like Car when he wasn't overthinking.

The radio blasted too loud to talk, so Donovan turned it down right after Car started the engine. "Are you mad at me?"

Car was already driving, but he stared less like that of a stranger and more like someone who did know Donovan. "I haven't heard you talk like that in a long time," Car said. "You're like an actual time traveler."

"Talk like what? I have a concussion—I never talk this stupidly."

Car laughed once. "Talk like... Well, like you don't want to kick my ass."

Donovan scrunched up his face as the words came back.

*It was just a joke!*

Had he said that to Car? What had he done?

"Did I kick your ass? Why would I do that? I don't really know what I did."

"You have," Car said, gripping the wheel tighter as they reached an intersection. "More than once. I guess it'll come back to you later, but you're kind of a huge dick."

"Me?" Donovan asked.

He'd never been called—

*Dick.*

*Bully.*

*Asshole.*

*Jerk.*

A lot of different voices said those words. A few he didn't recognize, but others he identified as Car and Rick.

What sort of person had he become?

"I mean, you're still rich and popular if that helps any," Car said honestly, eyes firmly on the road as if he drove in a deadly car chase though the speedometer registered under the speed limit. "Your friends are dicks too."

It didn't help. He didn't want to be popular, he just wanted to be friends with Car and Rick.

*Promise we'll always be friends, okay?*

He didn't have to work hard to retrieve that memory. Before their first day of middle school, they had heard rumors from older kids that their friends had ditched them for popularity or better friends.

Somehow, Donovan didn't feel he had better friends.

"Jayson," Car said, swallowing spit as if he'd licked a lemon. "You hung out with him a lot. I was surprised you didn't call him or his friends. You do remember them, right?"

*Party at Donny's house!*

Jayson's voice was dumb and irritating, but Donovan knew he'd invite the right people and buy the right drinks. Donovan was one of the right people—that's why he and Jayson were always together. That is, until the controversy surrounding his father's scam hit the news. Jayson

and his crew turned to vapor and hadn't spoken or partied since. Strangely, he hadn't felt any loneliness after going their separate ways. It felt just about the same with them there as it did now—except now there was no one to make laugh. No one to play pretend-friends with.

“I don't think we talk anymore,” Donavan said sleepily.

“So, you do remember them?” Car asked, almost disappointed.

The memory of the goons had been slipped under the door and he refused to let any new ones in.

Instead, he thought of how Car once snuck out of class in fourth grade to join Donavan during his scheduled recess hour. He knew how breaking the rules made Car jittery. He'd felt awed the rest of the day that his friend had played hooky just because he knew Donavan's dad wouldn't be at his birthday that Friday.

“You grabbed the wrong glasses,” Donavan had said.

“*Wrong glasses.*” Car had panted as they ran circles around the swing set. “I've no idea where I am. This is a playground? I was looking for the bathroom.”

Then, Donavan had tackled Car. Their hollering and laughing had given them away. They'd been caught.

“Sort of,” Donavan replied, trying not to think too hard about Jayson. “I don't think we were really friends.”

A blaring, screech-like noise ripped through Donavan's ears. He felt pangs in his head again. He winced. All he had to do was let the memories in to know why Car hated him, but he didn't want to. At least Car seemed to tolerate this confused version of himself. All he could think to say was:

“I'm sorry I broke my promise.”



They reached a stoplight and Car turned to look at him as if Donovan were a small child.

“What promise?”

“Before middle school started you made me promise we’d still be friends. I got popular—that’s it, right? It made me a jerk. I’m sorry.”

Car eyed him sadly, as if looking at an old picture. “It’s been a year since graduation, dude. We have lives now—it doesn’t matter. We were just kids.”

“But I want us to be friends. Do you remember fourth-grade hooky?”

“Listen,” Car said carefully, “you’re really out of it right now. You’re going to say a lot of things you don’t mean, and I’m sure it’s best for both of us if you just get back to your old self.”

But he did mean it. He’d never meant anything more in his life. He leaned his head back and tried to stay quiet.

He couldn’t. “Do you hate me?”

“I don’t hate you,” Car said, taking a moment to peel his magnetic eyes off the road and to face his former friend. “I don’t particularly like you, but...I do miss the old you.”

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The screech was minor, at least, to Donovan.

They were trapped in a red light, one car in front, several to the side and even more so behind.

The green light lateral to them had caused the ruckus. Perhaps a few rogue motorcyclists attempting to show off meters ahead, flitted in front of them. A red gleam flared as he caught sight of one, rumbling and growling, carelessly racing. The noise increased.

To Car, Donovan guessed, it was as if he'd just barely dodged a train zooming in front, and soon he'd have nowhere to drive but forward. At the crosswalk just ahead, two little girls held hands and ran for their lives to reach the other side, a sizable amount of time still left before the light changed.

Car had never liked crossing the street when they were kids, and whenever Donovan was with him, he'd let Car grab his arm. But now his friend was older and behind the wheel. He tilted his head to see Car's hands shaking.

It was a dumb question, but the one that most people asked despite the obvious, "Are you okay?" Donovan asked.

He realized Car's anxiety was now a mystery to him, too. Had he gotten somewhat better? Was he still on medication? Would Donovan end up taking the wheel?

Car, who'd been rather docile despite stating he was no longer his friend, suddenly tensed at the question, his grip on the wheel tightening. A growl-like "*What do you care?*" erupted from Car.

He might as well have slapped Donovan. Never—at least not that he remembered—had Car spoken to him with such hatred. Maybe if he remembered this fury, he'd know how to respond, but all Donovan could think to do when Car was upset was to tell a joke. That always seemed to work.

To him, only Car the friend existed. Not Car the enemy.

"I'm in the car with you, aren't I?" Donovan said, jokingly, but nervousness melted through.

Car's tone baffled him again. He might as well have been talking to a younger Donovan.

"You at least have to remember some of the party."

*It was just a joke!*

Donavan did. Just the one phrase. But what if he said it out loud and all the memories spilled in? What if...he really couldn't be friends with Car again?

"I'll take the wheel if it makes you feel better," was all Donovan could think to say.

Car's grip loosened.

"You know you can't do that."

"If I have to, I will. Keep that in mind if it makes you feel better." Donovan asked the next question knowingly, "It does, doesn't it?"

"Why?" Car looked at him in disbelief.

"Because you're my friend! I don't remember what happened...I think maybe my brain is trying to force me to...but I don't want to. I remember you, okay? I remember, even though you might *not particularly like me* I'm still your friend. I still want to be."

Car was silent. Stunned. His eyes were dubious now.

"What about you?" Donovan shot back. "I take it you don't drive much, but you still came to get me."

"I've been worried," Car admitted. "These last couple months—I almost called you from what I guess is your number."

It ached to hear Car say *from what I guess was your number*. Donovan thought back to the two little girls who'd crossed the street, holding hands. Would they let go one day and forget the other's number?

"I kept getting voicemails every other weekend on our house phone. Always deleted them, but they were from you," Car continued. "Really drunk, actually, inviting me to join the fun. I—I guess I was sort of afraid you'd gone off the rails."

Yes, but it would seem Donovan had jumped off a rail entirely.

An ambulance drove by, lights flaring and sound almost deafening. Donovan closed his eyes and put his hand on his ears to muffle the pain.

When he opened them, Car had a funny look on his face. His hands had stopped shaking. He regarded Donovan sadly, as if he'd been the one in the ambulance.

“Maybe if I called back,” Car said, “you wouldn't have jumped.”

The pain was back, almost permanently. He scrunched his eyes, “I slipped,” Donovan insisted.

They drove forward. Car was finally open to talking to him.

*It was just a joke*, he heard himself say. The joke wasn't meant to go that far. Jayson had gone too far.

“Why aren't we friends?” Donovan asked again. He knew in his chest whatever Car replied would reveal what Jayson and he had done.

Car spared Donovan a glance before looking back at the road. “You know, I'm not sure I want you to remember. It doesn't seem to be good for your health.”

Donovan didn't want to remember either. But it was becoming clearer that what he wanted most was for Car to be his friend again.

“You'll never come over anymore until we get over this, right?” Donovan asked. “Then keep talking.”

Car focused on the road, but Donovan knew he wasn't seeing the vehicles.

“A lot of things happened at once, really. You got mad at how much I was hanging out with Rick and not you, and I got mad at all the time you wasted with Jayson.”

Donovan could tell he was trying to make it hurt less.

“We did have one big fight,” Car admitted. “It was...almost like an explosion.”

“It happened at a party.”

Noises and smells of alcohol circulated him. They were more a feeling than an actual memory.

“It was the final straw. Rick and I already wanted to leave, but we stayed longer trying to make you come home with us rather than stay behind with Jayson.”

Out the window, Donovan saw a woman tugging her child, trying to make her walk away from an enticing ice cream shop.

He couldn't see the memories the way he could see the people on the street.

“You made a joke about Rick spiking the punch,” Car continued. His tone roughened, lost back in time, forgetting *this* Donovan didn't remember the party. “And then the joke somehow, turned into Jayson and everyone else's learning that Rick's mom was a drug addict.”

That, Donovan thought, was bad. And he was glad he couldn't remember.

They neared another stop where a street juggler pitched red balls in the air, twirling and circling from hand to air, never missing. The motion made Donovan dizzy, and, for a short moment, they looked orange and cylinder-shaped, like a small prescription jar.

“Then you and Jayson stole my medication and began tossing it around the crowd of people until I had a panic attack.”

Donovan looked away from the juggler to Car, his stomach churning. “And then?”

“Instead of apologizing, you just kept saying it was only a joke. So, I punched you in the face, but you punched harder.”

The pain in his head became red hot. Almost as if he could still feel Car's punch. It became too painful to talk. Donovan became sleepy, the world going dark, but not before he heard Car say:

"You haven't called me Car since. And only ever Carmichael on good days."

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It's what he had hoped for at the top of the ledge, to forget.

Regardless, when Donovan's eyes opened, he knew that wherever his brain had gone, it hadn't been to the white, empty space drained of memory. No, he'd been swimming in the party's sounds and sights from so long ago.

When he awoke to Car's terror-ridden face, he gasped for air as though he'd truly been submerged. Once he was awake, though, the day their friendship ended and all the bad days that had led to its demise washed away with every blink.

No, he couldn't remember. But Donovan knew what had happened.

"I should've answered your calls," Car's voice came in like muffled sounds under water, looking as blurred if he were down below. The tires screeched from his rushed parking job at the hospital.

Deep down, Donovan knew their friendship had died long before that awful party. Before the rumors, before the panic attack, and before he and Car got into a fist fight.

Everything had exploded that night. All the memories burned like a slow-growing fire climbing a rope until all that was left was a smoldering pile of ashes. Except one remnant, one tiny thread left: Donovan's need for Car's lifelong friendship.

"Rick," he heard Car's voice.

His surroundings filtered away in a haze.

“Donavan—I’m with Donavan. He’s in the hospital and he’s asking for you—and me. I think he forgot I’m here.”

Donavan had asked for Rick?

“Car?” Donavan said.

But Car was still talking. His voice was labored, as if he were running. “No, I don’t know if he’s okay. He jumped off a ledge.”

He realized someone was wheeling him into a room with Car following close behind. His eyes felt wet, and he wiped violently at his face. That’s how they’d felt at the canal. *Car, please, please, please forgive me.*

He wanted Car back. Not this Good Samaritan version, but his pretend brother.

His Mom and the doctors made a huge fuss. It took a while for Donavan’s mother to notice Car.

From his distorted vision, he saw his mom hug Car like she hadn’t seen him in ages. “I always knew you two would make up. Thank you so much for finding him.”

“He called me, actually,” Car clarified with a grimace. “He doesn’t seem to remember some things so I’d keep an eye on him.”

Frantic movement spun around Donavan, but he could still see his friend standing in the middle of it, shifting his foot, looking for the right opportunity to ditch. He hadn’t changed much.

The doctor eventually said something along the lines of Donavan being okay, but they still needed to keep him. His Mom sighed in relief, and repeatedly asked if they were certain. Donavan saw Car untense and deflate at the news, evident in the way his shoulders loosened and

his stance changed. At least, Donovan thought, Car wanted him to survive, even if he didn't necessarily want to stay by his side.

Then, less movement resulted fewer people: only his mother and Car.

"I'll leave you two alone," his mom said expectantly before leaving.

If the older Car didn't really care to be around him anymore, he didn't want those memories back. And Rick. What was Rick doing? Had he been the other voice laughing at Car's house?

Car looked around, mumbled something about getting better, and turned on his heel.

"Car, wait!"

He stopped and turned, almost amused. Donovan's voice had come out as if they'd been playing tag and Car was running too fast.

"I heard a screech when you parked," Donovan said. It was futile, trying to make Car stay. Something odd struck him, "Did you...speed on your way here?"

Car's lips twitched as if he wanted to laugh, but then he stared at Donovan, alone and anxious in the hospital bed. He saw Car's gaze stop at the top of his head where the bandage-covered wound rested.

"Of course, I sped. I thought you were dying."

It made Car stand there longer.

The words were dusty and left his throat dry, having waited there for ages. But Donovan hadn't said them until now. "I'm really sorry about the party. All of it."

Car crept closer. "It's okay now."



“Will you come and visit?” Donovan asked hopefully. “And bring Rick. Once I get all better we can catch up.” He eyed his friend as if things had and had not changed since they were kids. That he wasn’t a good friend, but that he wanted to be.

Once again, Car stared at him like an old, happy photo. Except this time, with less longing. Was the stare hope? Excitement?

Car sat at the end of Donovan’s bed, a lot less anxious and irritated than before. “You know, your mom told me in the lobby that she also thinks you jumped off.”

“I slipped,” Donovan clarified, but he no longer believed his own lie. “I wasn’t trying to die.”

“Good,” Car said, letting out a breath. “Because until you die, things can change. I can talk to Rick and see about meeting up once you’re all better.”

“But you’re coming back tomorrow, right?” Donovan begged with a whine.

He could practically hear Car’s thoughts. *Stop acting like you’re five, dude.*

Car shook his head in airy disbelief, his tone matching that of childish Donovan’s.

“Whatever you say, Donny.”

“What will happen if I remember?” Donovan asked. “If I’m not the younger Donny you like better?”

“You need to get better,” Car said in a more adult voice. Then, it melted again into a ring much like when they were kids. “Yeah. I’ll be back tomorrow. Who else can make sure you don’t set the place on fire like I can?”

Car finally headed for the exit.

“Oh, and, Donny?” Car said before shutting the door behind him.

“What?”

Donavan couldn't see him, but he could hear the smile in his voice. "I do remember fourth-grade hooky."

He drifted off into the white world with the drain plug, finding the courage to let the flood of memories rain back in. Each and every one. The good and the bad.

There were voices and pain. Despite them, he still wanted to see Car and Rick again, and from there see what was new.

The End