

eschatology

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eschatology

by [loyaulte_me_lie](#)

Summary

All his life, the world has been ending.

Notes

TRIGGER WARNINGS: suicide attempt, references to self-harm and abuse.

See the end of the work for [more notes](#)

"You're asking a ghost if he believes in ghosts,"

- Jacques Derrida -

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February 1990 // 17 years old

It happens in dribbles.

He remembers an explosion, brushes the surface of consciousness. Pain stabbing in his side, a shockwave, screams. Then black, again.

Another scream, this one closer at end. Blue lights, hands.

Then he wakes up. There's no fanfare to it, just one moment there's nothing and the next he's spluttering awake, coughing it from his lungs, damp and sticky. He wants to shake it off himself like a wet dog, but he can't move. There is no-one in the room; the monitors blink peacefully with their red, digital eyes and his coat is folded over the back of the empty visitor's chair. He stares at it for a while, then it all comes back to him, all at once. It doesn't crash; these things never do. It is not thunder, it is not *loud*. One moment it is not there and the next it is and suddenly he cannot breathe. Veronica. The bomb. Oh *fucking hell* what has he *done*?

The nurse chooses this precise second to walk in. "You're awake!" she says, rather unnecessarily, like every stupid hospital drama ever. Yes, he knows he's awake. Surprisingly enough, he was there when it happened. She bustles over to check his machines, her long black braid swinging against the offensive green of her hospital scrubs. "How are you feeling?"

He opens his mouth, tries to articulate it, but there is no nothing. No words. How is he feeling? That's the kind of question you ask a victim, an innocent, a person, not someone who just tried to blow up a school. He's quite surprised he isn't handcuffed to the hospital bed; surely Veronica's admitted everything by now, laid all the blame at his door. Not that he *minds*, it *was* his fault. Let him go to prison, serve his sentence. Veronica doesn't deserve to, Veronica has a bright future ahead of her, she doesn't need the stain; he's got nothing, might as well take the fall for both of them. Last act of love, baby. The nurse looks over, and he tries again, and when he can't seem to make the words come, he just shrugs instead.

"In pain?"

Another shrug. Her eyes soften. "I'll get you some more meds, if you want."

“Okay,” he says, for lack of anything better. He might as well take the free ticket to unconsciousness whilst he’s got it, but in the meantime... “What happened?”

She hums under her breath. “You’ve got a gunshot wound, burns. Scratched up too, all over your arms.”

“Wasn’t the question.”

She gives him a fond eye-roll – how is an eye-roll fond, he doesn’t understand, but she certainly manages to convey it – and says, “I’ll get you your meds and get the doctor to come and look at you. You only got out of surgery this morning, I don’t want you to get too stressed out.”

“I’m not stressed out,” he tries – he’s got to know, he’s got to...but she’s implacable.

“Doctor first. Then we’ll see.”

She smiles, and he subsides back against the pillows, watching her. She hums under her breath, like this is just another day for her, another day at work, walking the wards, being motherly to all the injured and sick kids. Not that he’s really a kid, or has needed a mother in years. When she pops out to get his meds, he stares at the empty chair and wonders who would fill it, if he had any choice in the matter. The person he wants is probably somewhere else in this bloody hospital, surrounded by all her friends, flowers and cards and chocolates, cooing and hugs and devoted parents.

He closes his eyes. At least his father isn’t here. Thank god for small mercies.

*

Sherwood Herald

Explosion at Westerberg High School Is Suicide, School Confirms

Yesterday, 17-year-old Veronica Sawyer became the latest in a string of suicides and suicide attempts at Westerberg High School, Sherwood, Ohio.

It transpires that Miss Sawyer had a homemade bomb and detonated it on the football fields during a pep rally after school. One other student was injured and is receiving treatment in the hospital; he is expected to make a full recovery.

Heather Duke, 17, a close friend of Miss Sawyer, has said that Miss Sawyer had been struggling with depression and “acting really weirdly for a few weeks now. We had no idea what had got into her, but I’m just...I’m so devastated. When is this all going to be over?”

Miss Sawyer’s parents have declined to comment, and our thoughts and prayers go out to them.

See page 12 for a more commentary on the teenage suicide epidemic at Westerberg High.

April 1981 // 9 years old

The car lurches down the highway, weaving from left to right like a drunken person on a sidewalk. Jason is trying to keep his crying quiet, to not let his Dad notice; not that his Dad is up to noticing *anything* at the moment, the way he's swearing and beeping on the horn even though there's barely another car in sight. He curls in on himself around the seatbelt; inside his head, the explosion is happening, again and again and again, and he sees Mommy waving, the smile on her face just-visible under the light and then he remembers screaming, undoing the seatbelt and slamming his hands against the door but the child-lock was on and he couldn't get out and then...

After, Dad had come over, grinning from ear to ear, covered in dust, like always. "What are you doing here, tyke?" he'd laughed. "Did your mother cave after all? I knew she'd come around eventually, not like you were doing anything else at home...where is she? Kathleen?"

Jason hadn't been able to speak, had only stared, dumbstruck. Dad had turned back around. "Why the long face?"

"Mommy..." Jason had whispered, and then, to his horror, had begun to cry, flinched away from Dad, back into the rental car. Dad's eyes had narrowed, he'd been about to get pissed, Jason knows that look all too well, but then he'd glanced over to the smoking remains of the library and then back at Jason and then away again...and...and...

And now they're in this car, pulling into a parking lot; the 7-Eleven sign shines bright against the murky darkness. Dad sits, suddenly silent, in the driver's seat for a moment and then twists around and Jason quickly wipes his face. *Boys don't cry*, Dad has growled, more times than Jason can count, there's no point pissing him off even more than he already is. Survival instincts. You learn them early. When Jason blinks, he realises that Dad hasn't come to haul him by the t-shirt or give him a smack or yell, red-faced and up-close; he's holding a five-dollar bill, drops it in Jason's lap.

"Stop bawling and get yourself something to eat," he mutters, unclicking the child lock. Jason doesn't need telling twice.

He wanders the aisles of 7-Eleven for a while, looking up at all the food Mommy never allowed him to have. She never liked convenience stores, always dragged him to the market. He saw other kids hanging around on the street corners with their skateboards and footballs and she'd always told him he could go play with them, if he wanted, but he didn't want to leave her side, stuck close to her legs, watching as she smiled and chatted to all the stall-holders, her bright red hair caught up in a headscarf. There aren't any fruit and vegetables here. Eventually, the clerk happens upon him lurking in the biscuit aisle, not knowing what to do or where to go.

"You alright, kid?" she asks. Her hair is extremely straight and dark, dyed bright blue at the ends, and her eyes slant; the 7-Eleven jumper hangs too loose, but she's smiling, and he stares because no-one's really smiled at him like that in weeks.

“Dad said to get something to eat,” he says, and she nods.

“Okay. Well, is there anything I can help you reach?”

“I don’t like biscuits, I…”

“Oh. What do you like?”

“I don’t know.”

She folds her arms, purses her lips, thinking. “We got Slurpees. They’re always popular with the kids.”

“What’s a Slurpee?”

“Oh *man*, you haven’t lived. Come on.”

The machine is right behind the counter, and has SLURPEE emblazoned on the blue plastic side. The girl picks up a cup. “What flavour? Blue or red?”

“Colours aren’t flavours,” he says, and then, “Blue,” because the blue in the machine matches the blue of her hair and blue is the colour of Mommy’s favourite headscarf. Maybe blue’s his favourite colour too, but he hasn’t decided yet.

“One blue Slurpee coming right up. You got to take your first sip here, can’t believe you’ve never had a Slurpee before. Your parents health nuts?”

He doesn’t know what a health nut is, so just shrugs. She hands him the cup. “Two dollars, please.”

It’s cold in his hand, and he takes his first sip as she gets his change. Somehow, it’s even colder in his mouth, freezing and burning and kind of painful, just like putting your hand into snow. Then the sweetness hits, and suddenly he’s not thinking about Mommy and the explosion and Dad, driving and swearing, all he can feel is the cold, seeping into his head, cold and sweet, turning his tongue numb.

“Enjoy,” the girl says, and he smiles at her with blue-stained lips, turns to go back out to the car. He doesn’t know it yet, but it’s the start of an era.

*

November 1989 // 17 years old

“I didn’t know you played,” Veronica says, eyeing the violin case tucked against the opposite wall. JD looks up from his book, over to his girlfriend – his *girlfriend*, what a thing that is – perched on the desk with her sketchbook open on her lap, tapping her pencil against her mouth. “Are you any good?”

It’s the type of question that has teeth. He shrugs. “I guess.”

“Would you play for me? Your dad isn’t in...”

Trust Veronica to notice, thank God she doesn’t push anything when it comes to his dad. She notices and knows when he’s feeling bruised and doesn’t talk about it, just gives him longer hugs than usual, glares the idiots out of the way in the school hallways so he doesn’t have to deal with them, using her popularity as a shield. She’s watching pretty intently, and then her face falls, and she says hurriedly: “Only if you want to. If it’s private, no worries I...”

“No, I’ll play for you,” he says, putting the book down. Her smile is sudden, bright, and his heart is so warm right now, so full; god, Veronica, what are you doing to me? “I just... haven’t played in front of anyone, in a while. So...”

“I’m excited!”

He finds a smile for her and then gets up, goes to get the case, opening it carefully and pulling out the instrument. The dusty lamplight sets the rosewood glowing, warm, loving, and he breathes in at the feeling he always gets when he opens it, the memories of his mother laughing, the violin tucked up under her chin, rain drumming down on the rooftop and her hair loose, spinning in circles with him, her hands flying almost too fast to see. She’d been magic, his mother, absolutely magic, and he blinks away the tears rising to his throat at the thought. Not the time.

“Anything you like, in particular?”

“Play me your favourite.”

“Oh, you’re evil. I can’t choose,” he says, knowing exactly which piece he’s going to pick, finding the music for it and unfolding the stand, swinging the violin beneath his chin. There’s a pause, where the world seems to hold its breathe and he centres himself, closes his eyes for a moment, and then starts to play. Halfway through, he opens his eyes, looks over at Veronica; she’s watching him, her eyes full of stars, her mouth half open, blonde curls escaping all over the place. The realisation hits him, right then, right there, like a punch to the gut: *I’d kill for you. I’d die for you.*

“What *was* that?” Veronica breathes, shining, afterwards. He tries not to think about how giddy the look on her face makes him feel, sends butterflies skimming through his insides.

“Danse Macabre. Saint-Saens. Death and skeletons and a graveyard.”

“You’re incredible. I’ve never seen *anyone* play like that before.”

“Thank you,” he says, and she leans forward in the way that means she wants him to kiss her. He puts the violin down and crosses the room to her, happily obliges, framing her face in his hands.

“You should join the band,” she mumbles against his lips. The laugh is forced out of him.

“Not in a million years. Do I look like a band geek? This is *art*.”

“Pretentious, more like.”

“Yes, that too.”

They kiss again, long and slow. The next day, JD gets into school to find “FAG” written in permanent marker on his locker – *idiots, when will they ever get more creative?* – but inside is a sketch of him in his trench coat with his eyes closed, the violin cradled against one shoulder with skeletons rising up from their graves all around him, a moon hanging above his head in a roughly shaded night sky. Veronica has scribbled her name and a love heart at the bottom of the paper, and he folds it away into his coat pocket for safekeeping, trying not to smile like an idiot. It doesn’t quite work.

*

September 1978 // 5 years old

“No, Jason, not like that. See, hold it under your chin, there you go, and there...yes! Yes, just like that! Well done!”

Jason concentrates very hard on pressing the string down, drawing the bow across the top. It screeches like an angry cat, but Mommy is beaming, her hands clasped together. He tries another string, and another, wants to keep on going forever.

“Can I make it sound like you?” he asks, after another drawn out squeal from the violin.

“When you’re a bit bigger,” she says gently. “If you practise every day, you’ll be better than me in no time.”

“I’ll never be better than you.” There’s a funny reflection in the violin, and his arm is starting to hurt, so he brings it down for a moment.

“Oh, one day,” Mommy says. “Just you wait.”

*

February 1990 // 17 years old

“We wanted to come and see you.” Veronica’s mother looks older, worn down, eroded away. Her roots are turning grey, her cardigan has a stain on the pocket, and she looks as if she’ll collapse at any moment. “I’m sorry, for what she did. I just...” she swallows. Veronica’s father is just wan, silent, his eyes entirely elsewhere. JD clenches his fists, digs his nails into his palms. He should tell them, he should, he has to, this isn’t right for them to think their daughter attempted murder and succeeded at suicide, it’s his fault, god, it’s his whole entire fault, and if he wasn’t so numb right now, he thinks he’d be screaming. He’s sure he will be, when it all sinks further than his skin. Veronica’s mother blinks, hard, sits down in the visitor’s chair.

Veronica had the exact same eyes, blue-green and fierce, like the sea in California. Something like grief begins to coalesce in his stomach.

“Anything we can do to help, Jason, you just let us know, alright? I know the two of you were fighting towards the end, but she loved you, I know she did. Mothers always do. You made her so happy.”

Did I? he thinks, desperately. I don't think so. Not this last month, not when he wanted to keep going, to get rid of everyone who'd even thought about hurting her and she'd put her foot down and looked him in the eye and said no, no, JD, this ends right here, right now. And he'd pulled the gun on her and she'd frozen, staring, terrified but of course he could never shoot her, what was he thinking but then...but then there'd been the fear...and the weakness...and the fact men aren't supposed to be weak, they're not, they're supposed to go in and blow shit up and get the job done and move on and...he doesn't want to think about what happened next. He can't. If he does, he'll go *insane*.

More insane than you already are, a voice in his head whispers, and he shudders. Mrs Sawyer mistakes it for grief and reaches for his hand. He lets her. *I'm the one who murdered your daughter*, he thinks, wishing he could say it but thankful that he can't. She didn't want to die. She should be sitting here right now, not me, I should be dead and gone and what a good fucking riddance that would be. The tears blur his vision, and he wonders what it would like right now if his own mother was sitting by his hospital bed, holding his hand, running her thumb over his knuckles.

“It's okay,” Mrs Sawyer whispers. It's really not.

*

The next day the police come to talk to him. He gets a shock when the nurse opens his door and they're there in full uniform and stern faces, and he thinks, *oh yeah, killing three people is actually a crime*, but he's damned if he can make himself feel bad about them. Not like any more guilt is going to make a difference to the load he's going to carry for the rest of his life, and they were, admittedly, shitty people who *deserved* to die. He toys briefly with the idea of admitting everything, going to jail, but he finds himself telling lie after lie, a whole fucking sandcastle of them, because god help him, he's seventeen and he's a fucking coward; he doesn't want to go to jail. Not really. In any case, only two people ever knew the whole truth of it and one of those people is dead, so it's not like anyone can contradict him, if he plays his cards right.

“What's going to happen to me,” he asks, when they're done with the “what do you remember?” and “what can you tell us about Veronica Sawyer?” and “don't worry, son, this is just standard procedure. You're not in any trouble.”

The black cop leans forward, frowning a little. “Your father left town the day of the explosion. We've tried to track him down but with not much luck.”

“I don't want to go back to my father.”

“Why?”

JD shrugs and pulls a face, and the white cop's eyes narrow but he doesn't say anything, and the black one is saying: “Well, your father is neither here nor there, now. There was an aunt

listed as one of your emergency contacts, in Chicago. She's flying over tonight, should be with you by tomorrow. Easier than trying to get you into the foster system when you turn eighteen soon."

An aunt? JD feels his eyebrows rise. He doesn't remember an aunt, maybe something from his childhood, he doesn't really know. His father's side or his mother's? *It's not like it matters*, his brain supplies, *she's not going to like you. No-one likes you. And it's only for a few months anyway and then you'll be on your own again and wouldn't it be better if...* there's no point getting his hopes up. The cops get up to leave.

*

She has ginger hair, just like his mother, the same crinkles around her eyes and he wonders if life will ever stop dealing him punches, if he'll ever make it out of the ring alive. She smiles, half-uncertain. "Hello, long-lost nephew," she says, her accent thick and lilting. He just stares at her, and she laughs a little. "God, you have her eyes, don't you? Sorry. This is just so strange. I'm Fiona. Don't think there's any point in you calling me Auntie now, is there, you're a bit old for that."

"Okay," he says, and there's something kind of sad on her face, but it's gone, quickly, and then Sue the nurse is coming in with his discharge papers and then they're getting in her car and driving to his old house to pick up his things because of course his father has left them all there. He goes up to his old room, feeling the sting and pull of his stitches, his breathlessness like a ghost, and stands in the doorway looking at it all. The camp-bed. The wardrobe door, half-open. His stack of unreturned library books, the few he owns, the violin case next to the window. It doesn't take him long to pack, and then he's coming back down the stairs with the violin clutched carefully in his hands and the few clothes and his books, and then that's it. Fiona is waiting quietly in the sitting room.

"Come on," she says, unreadable. He wonders if he'll ever learn to read her, if it'll ever get less scary to not know what someone is thinking. "Let's get you out of here."

*

"Hope it'll do," Fiona says. "Sometimes Roger works in here, but he doesn't *really* need it. We could do it up for you, if you wanted."

JD forces a smile for her. She smiles back, lifts her hand like she's going to caress his cheek, then thinks better of it. "We're really glad to have you here, you know that?"

"Yeah" he manages, tries. "I'm glad to be here. Thank you." He's got to try. She's been trying all the way here, on the plane, in the supermarket, getting things he likes, setting him up in her house. Can people be really like this? She smiles again.

"I'll get on with dinner. Hope you like stir-fry."

He puts down the violin on the bed and the sheet music on the desk and hangs his coat over his chair and looks out of the window, into the gloom gathering at the edges of the street. Another page turned over, another chapter about to start. Another new school, new kids, and

still the voice in his head, on and on and on, *just die already, fucking coward, I'm so sick of you, fucking sick of you, what's the point in being here any more? She's just being nice cause she doesn't know you, everyone who knows you hates you even Veronica hated...*

Shut Up he growls at it, going over to the bed and sitting on it, pressing his hands to his temples. It subsides, hissing, into its cobwebbed corner. Somewhere downstairs, a door bangs and then his door is banging open and a black streak is barrelling into the room followed by an equally ginger streak and he's reacting before he even knows what's happening, flinging himself backwards and bringing his hands up to his face but it's only...

"Mopsy, get OUT from under the bed, you're NOT supposed to be there!"

He lowers his hands a little, glances down. The girl is on all fours, her bottom sticking in the air, peering under the bed. Something mews. "Mopsy!" she says, again, and then looks up and beams. There's a slash of bright green marker pen on one of her cheekbones. "Hello! You must be Cousin Jason, I'm Orla and I'm six and Mommy says that dinner is ready and Mopsy *would* say hello to you but he's hiding under the bed because he's *silly* and he's a *scaredy-cat*."

"Orla, I hope you didn't barge in on your cousin without knocking," a man's voice says, amused, and JD looks up to see who he presumes is his uncle leaning against the door. Orla makes an overexaggerated "oops" face, and JD stares at her, at her apparent fearlessness in the face of being told off. He can't remember a time he would ever have done that to his father. "Hello, Jason, it's good to meet you. Call me Roger. Do you want to go wash your hands for food?"

The table is laid for five of them, and another girl joins them after a while, twelve or thirteen, freckles plastered across her nose as though someone got a bit too zealous with a paintbrush. She turns a fierce red as JD sits down next to her, stares at her bowl. Fiona puts a bowl in front of him: "Dig in," she says, encouragingly, and he picks up his cutlery and stares at it, at the vegetables brightly coloured and poking out of the mass of brown-white noodles, the dusting of chopped herbs on top, the slime of the spinach. The smell makes his stomach grumble, and he tentatively scoops up his first bite, wondering at this, at home-cooked food, at everyone sitting down around a table, Fiona and Roger listening intently to Orla giggle over her playdate with her friend. His other cousin, Mary, joins in sometimes, but still won't look him in the eye – *smart girl*, the voice whispers – and Fiona must have told them to be gentle or something, because they let their conversation ebb and flow around him, Roger sometimes turning to explain who a certain person is or the context of an event. It's kind of them, JD realises after a while. They're trying to include him.

After dinner, Roger stops him as he's about to head up the stairs. "Not sure if Fi told you," he says, gentle, "but I'm a licensed therapist. PTSD and all that stuff, down at the veterans' association. The hospital didn't tell us much, but I know you're struggling with something, so if you ever want to talk then you know where to find me, okay?"

JD blinks – therapy? *It's not for the likes of you*, his head provides, helpfully. *You're not supposed to get better, there is no better than this, why do you deserve to get better, why...* therapy. Maybe. He nods, and Roger smiles, turns back to the stack of dishes waiting for him in the sink.

*

Some days he stares at the violin, willing himself to pick it up and just play it. His fingers twitch, ache. Others, he just lies down on the bed and stares at the ceiling and counts his breaths, in and out. School isn't *bad*, per se, he just ghosts through it, ignoring questions he gets asked, doing the bare minimum to get by. Kids stare at him, stalking through the halls in his black trench-coat, Moses parting the fucking Red Sea, but they don't bother him, not anymore.

(The first day a pair of the popular girls tried it on and he just glared and ignored them until they left him alone again. He's heard them whispering, the jocks joking around about him, but that's just it. If they try and fuck with him he'll put them on the ground. It's as easy as breathing, all it takes is a little cleverness, a little skill. They're stronger than him, but he's been up against stronger opponents his whole life. It's nothing new.)

It's a robotic life, binary, codes ticking over in streams of noughts and ones. Black and white, grey bleeding in around the edges. There's nothing in the future, jagged edges and blood and glass in his past and he's stuck between the two with the wind howling in his ears and... and...and...

*

July 1987 // 15 years old

He pounds around the block, the dawn spilling like watered-down paint across the rooftops of the houses. A few commuters whiz past on the road, but he pays them no mind. The breath is sand-paper rough in his lungs and sweat clings his t-shirt to his chest, but he doesn't care, keeps running, relishing in it, in this pain that drives his thoughts further back into his mind with fresh air and the scream of muscles pushed nearly-too-far and the impact of tarmac shuddering up through joints. He comes to a halt outside their new front door. This time it's red and flaking, and goes into his stretches, then into the backyard to do the rest of the exercises he's set himself.

The creak of a window. JD stiffens.

"Yo *princess*."

He doesn't turn around, keeps going with his press-ups, hands scraping against the gravel. They'll be grazed when he gets up, but he doesn't care.

"I'm *talking* to you, don't ignore me you little shit."

"*What?*" JD pulls himself upright, glares up at the window. Dad is half-hanging out of it, red-faced, squinting in a way that says the hangover is pretty bad today. JD isn't surprised, really, first night in a new town with a new rental car always sends Dad out drinking and partying in the nearest city. He'd come home at 3am, stumbling into the house and singing drunkenly; JD had laid as still as possible in his new unfamiliar bed and hoped Dad would just pass out, would ignore him. Those are the better nights.

“I need you to go to hardware store, pick me up some bits and pieces.”

“I’ve got school.”

“And? What’s one late morning going to do to your grade, Mr Swot?”

“Good impressions...”

“Don’t matter. Go in, get the job done, boom. Are you going to stand there arguing with me or are you going to get on with it?” Dad’s voice has gone quieter, and JD feels his stomach crawl desperately downwards, looking for somewhere to hide.

“Fine, *fine*.”

“Don’t take that tone with me, sonny boy, you know I don’t like it. Money’s on the table. Get yourself some food while you’re at it.”

“Sure.”

The window bangs shut, and JD breathes, slow, wipes the dust off his hands and goes back inside to wash and change his clothes. Later, he stops by the 7-Eleven on the way to school, saunters into class with the taste of Slurpee still on his tongue. The teacher glares at him and mutters something about “good first impression, Mr Dean,” but lets him take his seat at the front of the classroom. It’s always the front for the new kid, especially the late new kid. He gets out the book they’re supposed to have been studying and his notebook and starts to write; another new place, another new school, same old, same old.

*

December 1994 // 22 years old

The street is filled with cloudy light, translucent. He pulls his coat closer, wriggles his fingers to keep them warm. Zoe is busy setting up the amp, plugging in all her different cables and cords, their permit stuck in the top of his violin case. She hauls the microphone closer. Shoppers bustle past, a couple looking over half-interested, their attention drawn by the bright purple of Zoe’s dress, perhaps, or the confidence screaming from every line of her.

“Ready?” she asks. He tweaks a couple of strings, adjusts his stance.

“Yeah.”

“Okay, let’s do this!”

His mind clears, and the music starts, swelling, alive. Zoe joins in after a few bars, her voice warm and low, blending with the violin, the words like rounded pebbles on her tongue. A few people stop to watch, to stare. Zoe’s swaying, one of her braids falling from her top-knot, eyes half-closed. A little girl runs up to put a coin in their case, and JD smiles at her, keeps playing, fingers flying. After the first song, there’s a little applause – Zoe takes a theatrical bow, sticking her arms out, and turns to him.

“Doing ok there, maestro?” she asks, laughing, and he sticks an elbow into her side. She turns back to the crowd. “Collecting for charity this Christmas, be generous!”

“Let’s do Hark the Herald next.”

“Darn you strike a hard bargain. That descant’s a bitch,” she’s saying, but he’s already started the introduction, and she’s stepping forward, back to the microphone.

Halfway through their set, he sees Roger and Orla loitering at the edge of the crowd. Orla runs up to him, her arms full of tinsel. “Here!” she says, “Put it on your head!”

“Really?”

“Who’s this?” He feels rather than sees Zoe put her arms around his waist, rest her chin on his shoulder. “You trading me in for the younger model, Jason?”

He snorts. “Don’t be ridiculous. This is my cousin, Orla and...what are you doing?”

“You need to *wear* the tinsel, that’s why I *bought* it, silly!”

“Yes, Jason, put the tinsel on.”

“You’re a traitor,” he tells Zoe, but she just laughs, helps to tie the tinsel in a halo around his head.

“Angelic,” she says, brightly, and his stomach sinks a little; angelic, no hell no, anything but that. He remembers Veronica saying nearly the same thing, in the same tone of voice; they’d been decorating her house for Christmas, and god, he hadn’t done decorations in years, not since Mom, and Veronica had chased him around the sitting room with tinsel, laughing so hard he was surprised she could even *move*. Zoe must catch the look on his face, because she gives him a careful smile, the one that knows he’s slipping back into his head, slides her fingers into his, grounding. “Okay, right. Well, it was nice meeting you, Orla, but we’ve got an audience waiting.”

Orla starts to frown, so JD reaches out to mess up her hair. “You’ll meet Zoe properly later, kid. I’m bringing her home after we’ve finished the music.”

“Yay!” Orla bounces up and down on the tips of her toes; something warm starts simmering in his chest. Huh. Family. Sometimes he forgets about that. He turns back to their small audience, the microphone at the centre, the buildings their theatre, the cold December sky their backdrop.

*

March 1990 // 18 years old

“He’s not a bad kid, is he?” that’s Roger’s voice, drifting out of a half open door. JD freezes at the top of the stairs, half-interested. “Just...seems very quiet. Very sad.”

“Not surprised,” Fiona replies. A pan clatters. “We hadn’t met the last time I saw Kathleen, but yeah...I kept trying to tell her to get away from Bud, that he was no good for her, but she wouldn’t listen. Something about Jason and keeping it together, you know what abuse victims are like, I guess. Trapped, but she wouldn’t admit it to herself.”

“Do you know what happened to Kathleen?”

“No. No idea. I’ve wanted to ask Jason but he’s so fragile at the moment I daren’t. Like one wrong look will send him shattering into pieces on the floor. Have you thought more about talking to him?”

She doesn’t know, JD thinks after a moment. But then again, how would she? He never knew he had an aunt, his father must have known but...isolating is what Dad did, he supposes, running from state to state, job to job, no roots down, no routes out, just the two of them driving through life like some sick version of the *On the Road*. He’d read it and sometimes wish he could dive face-first right in, run away to live a fictional life instead.

“I don’t want to force it on him. He knows what I do, and we’ve just got to be gentle. Make him feel welcome enough here to open up, when he’s ready. He already likes you, I can tell.”

“He barely speaks to me.”

“He barely speaks full stop.”

A sigh, footsteps. JD wonders if they’ve just hugged; absently, his mind drifts to Veronica and the way she’d feel, her face pressed down against his shoulder. They’d been nearly the same height, and he’d liked that, equals, toe-to-toe. Veronica. His stomach clenches and he grips the bannister, tries to drive his thoughts elsewhere.

“I just want him to be happy. I want to look after him. He’s the last thing I’ve got left of Kat, and you know...”

“Yeah, honey. I know.”

There’s another long silence, and JD creeps back to his room. Enough is enough. He can’t open up to them, he can’t – that way lies hatred and being kicked out when they discover what an awful person he is. He’s got to act more normal, more eighteen-year-old boy. Perhaps he should start running again, get out of the house, perhaps he should hang around after school so Fiona thinks he’s got friends, got people. He doesn’t have to tell her he’s in the library, does he? He sits down on his desk chair, fists his hands in his hair. It’s going to be okay, he tells himself. This is salvageable. It has to be.

*

“Is there a park, somewhere near here?” he asks the next morning over breakfast. Fiona blows on her coffee mug; Roger turns from his preparation of the girls’ lunchboxes.

“Why?” he asks.

“I like running.”

“Uh-huh? It would be good for you to get outdoors.”

“Yeah. Did you get the all-clear from the doctor?”

“Yeah.” JD slouches a little in his chair. “Yeah, he said I’m fine to go back to normal. Pretty much healed.”

“Well, that’s good news. Yes there is a park, a couple of blocks from here. It’s a nice one, actually. Do you have running gear?” Fiona smiles at him, happy, and JD thinks: good, fooled you.

“Yeah, I do.”

“Well. As long as you keep safe and don’t overexert yourself then that should be fine,” Fiona drinks her coffee just as feet come pounding down the stairs. Orla’s hair is in huge bunches, frizzing and ginger and she runs at JD, flings her arms around his middle. JD has taught himself not to freeze up at this anymore, pats the top of her head like one would the cat. “Bye Cousin Jason,” she says. “Have a good day!”

“Thanks,” he says. “You too.”

*

The park is pretty and green, blossoming dripping from the trees like every day is a wedding day, sun-drenched and glorious, and he’s up before school to go running there. It takes a few weeks to get his body back used to it, to pushing itself to the edge, thundering round the path past the early-morning dog walkers. Sometimes the dogs run alongside him for a few metres, barking happily. He sprints on, gasping for air, but it doesn’t help, does it, the voice is inside him, it’s something he can’t outrun.

Three days a week.

Four.

Five.

Sundays, all morning, just running and running and running, and then wandering off with the money Fiona gives him for the cafeteria to buy cigarettes or Slurpees, but even now walking into a 7-Eleven, he half expects to see Veronica there, in her blue skirt and blazer, her blonde hair huge and curly, leaning on the counter with the Slurpee machine. He tells himself he’s not looking for her. *She’s dead*, he reminds himself. *Dead, dead, dead. You killed her. You killed her, just like you killed Mom. If you hadn’t been there Mom would have got away from Dad and perhaps she’d still be alive and Fiona would still have a sister and the world would be a better place with her music and her sun-caught smiles, and you...you’d not exist. But the world doesn’t need you, the world doesn’t, it...*

He doesn’t really know when the Slurpees stop working. But one day he’s drinking one – Coca Cola, they hadn’t had any raspberry left that morning, and he’s waiting for it to hit his brain, to freeze his thoughts out but they just keep tumbling, jumping, sick and mad and

frenzied, shouting in his head and he throws the drink away in disgust. His sleeve rides up, and he sees the scars there, and he thinks, well...

*

It's quite easy to steal a knife from a busy household.

*

Some days, he gets back from school and he plans. The knife is a hard shape under his mattress; he can feel it. It digs into his back and he flexes his toes, hard, and imagines it in his head. He doesn't want to scare Orla, or Mary. It'll have to be some time they're not here, out on some playdate. He'll do it quietly, in here, when everyone's out, and he'll be dead by the time they come back and off their hands and god...

Will he see Veronica? Perhaps.

*

Days, drifting. He sneaks downstairs and looks at the calendar. "What's up?" Fiona asks from the kitchen table, looking up from her writing.

"Oh, some friends were wondering about a party," he says vaguely, scanning the arrangements, the lives laid out in neat little squares in front of him. It's reassuring, in a way, to see that Orla and Mary are going to the dentist on the 30th, that Roger has some do on the 28th, that their days will keep unfolding after he's gone. Perhaps the 19th, he thinks. Nice prime number, indivisible by anything but itself. Kind of a metaphor for his life, standing alone in the tide sweeping upwards and onwards, always alone, always *meant* to be alone, not designed for anyone else. Awkward, sad, hurting.

Once he's decided the day, something inside of him settles. There's a kind of sick excitement, roiling in his stomach, like bile, like a storm that's about break, a lightning straining against the skin of clouds. The voices in his head get louder and louder, shouting over each other sometimes so loudly he's frozen, listening to them, doesn't realise people are speaking or something needs doing or that he needs to get out of the way.

Coward.

Why don't you just do it already?

Not like anyone will miss you, sad worthless piece of shit piece of shit piece of shit

You killed the only good person in the world the people who love you die, you're a curse you'd better get away before you curse Fiona and her family too

Monster...monster...monster...

And actually have you forgotten the fact you don't even care about the other three people you murdered huh? They were just kids too, they could have grown up or grown out of it but no

you decided to play god and...normal people would care, freak... Veronica cared about them, why don't you?

On the days leading up to it, he traces the knife against the insides of his forearms, against the old scars, the ones that never quite made it, where his hand faltered or his brain gave up, the ones that remind him that he couldn't even succeed at fucking *suicide* of all the goddamn things...

It's a rainy afternoon; it pounds, drum-like, on the roof, a whole marching band up there. School was dull as usual, nothing of any interest these days. Some of the jocks had found enough bravery to actually shove into him in the corridor, tried to start something, but he'd just stared and bunched his fists, pale and ethereal and all the more terrible for it, and they'd receded, hissing and muttering, a little scared. Let them be, he'd thought viciously. Learn your fucking place, morons. Get some humility. He stares blankly at his chemistry notes, and then his eyes catch on the opposite page of the textbook, on the bright blue box cheerfully explaining that 2,4,6 – trinitro methylbenzene is also known as trinitro toluene, or TNT, and he's falling off a cliff and back in the boiler room of Westerberg High and there's Veronica and she's pleading with him and all he says is... "I wish I had more TNT."

He doesn't realise the knife is in his hands until the tip is pricking the underside of his left wrist. Timings be damned, he can't do this; what an effort it is, to keep breathing, to keep up this pretence, to take one more step along the world. What a gargantuan effort, what a weak, worthless person he is. The world will be better without him. This is something he knows, a fact, as sure as the sun will rise in the east.

The pain of the knife brings him back to reality, to something more than reality; everything is in sharp focus; the glint of the metal, the give of skin, the pulse, thrashing out the last seconds of his life. It could end now. *It has* to end now. What right does he have to keep on breathing? He's a murderer, a coward, the villain in someone else's story and villains don't deserve second chances. He should be in jail, he should be dead. He presses the knife harder, hisses as it breaks the skin. Blood bubbles up like a reprimand; he draws the knife in a deep line, carefully, slowly. Red dribbles down, drips onto the wood floor, then more, then faster, a stream, more and more and more. Finally, he's doing the right thing – he should have done this years ago, not fucked around with those shallow cuts and cigarette burns and running and fucking blue Slurpees – none of those are anything more than things to pass the time, a wire fence trying to hold back a tsunami. This, this is permanent.

He switches hands, cuts the other and then sits in the chair and breathes, tastes the oxygen on his tongue, watches himself bleed. Veronica, he thinks, distantly, I'm coming to join you, heaven or hell, baby, but then there's a knock on the door and it's opening but he doesn't care to move, and Fiona is screaming:

"Shit! Shit, JD, what have you *done*! No, *no*, Orla, don't come in here, go get Daddy, that's a good girl, *NOW*, fast as you can – Mary, Mary, you've got to phone 911 for me. It's going to be okay, it's going to be okay, girls, just do what I say..."

And then time skips, and she's pulled the knife away from him, flinging it onto the bed, grabbing handfuls of tissues to press against the wounds and he's fighting, half-hearted and

she snarls “Don’t you dare, don’t you *fucking* dare Jason Dean; sit still I’m trying to *help* you...”

“I want to die,” he rasps. His cheeks are wet, his eyes blurring. Fiona is a red-headed smudge. “Please, just...let me die, let me *die*...” and then the sobs are tearing up his throat, stripping cells away like acid or Drain-o and he’s sliding off the chair, half on to Fiona and she’s got one hand on his bleeding wrist and the other arm wrapped around his shoulder, pulling him close. He presses his face into the crook of her shoulder, clings, and sobs. She smells of something soft, floral, just like Mom used to.

“Hey,” she says. “Hey, *hey*. It’s going to be okay, yeah? We’ll get you through this, I promise it’s going to be okay. Hey.”

“It’s not it can’t how can it be okay I’m a monster I can’t oh god just let me die, let me *die*...”

There are footsteps pounding, and then Roger’s voice, and Orla’s piping up “Is Cousin Jason going to be okay?” and Roger, “Not now, honey, you and Mary go in the sitting room, okay, I need to let the EMTs in...*no*, Orla, I said sitting room, not the time...yes, upstairs, third door on the left...”

and suddenly Fiona is gone and there are two strangers in scrubs crouching down and someone’s wrapping his wrists and the other has fingers against his neck, shining a torch in his eyes and he shuts them against the light because he’s alive...god, he’s still alive...still...

*

Fiona sits with him all night. She doesn’t say a word, just holds his hand, gently, breathes with him, her eyes glisten in the dark. Sometime in the early hours of the morning, he takes a breath, acid in his lungs, and says: “Mom walked into a building just as Dad was about to blow it up. I was there, in the car. I saw it happen.”

An intake of breathe; her fingers tighten on his, but it’s not to stop him and he continues, barely lucid, reminding himself that she can’t know about the murders, she can’t, but she... “And my girlfriend, Veronica. Same thing. Stuff stolen from Dad’s supplies. Boom. I’m a curse; everyone I love dies.”

“Jason,” she says, all kinds of gentle. There’s a lump in his throat. “You’re not a curse.”

“How do you know that?”

“Because you’re a person, okay? People aren’t curses. I’m so sorry these things happened to you, god, I wish I’d tried harder to get Kathleen to come home with me, but...sometimes things happen. And it’s shit when they do, but it’s nothing you’ve done. You know that, right?”

“Yeah,” he lies, and then sighs, stares at the ceiling. She shifts next to him.

“Have I told you what happened to Roger?”

“No.”

“He was in the army, oh years ago. Out on patrol, Vietnam, with his two best friends. They were in the safe zone, weren’t expecting anything to happen, and then, well. An explosive someone had missed. Roger, by some luck or miracle, got out pretty much unscathed, but he was the only survivor. He was only a few years older than you.”

“Shit.”

“Yeah. He blamed himself for a very long time. But he learned to forgive himself, has used those feelings to get training and be able to help others. Because you have to forgive yourself, eventually, or you’ll be stuck in the same place for ever, never able to move, never able to make a difference in the world or to live your life.”

“Sounds like you’re the therapist.”

“When you’re married to one for ten years you tend to pick some things up. I think it would be good for you to talk to him, you know.”

JD pauses, thinks, and then nearly before he knows it, “Yeah, okay.” His voice feels very small. Fiona squeezes his fingers again.

“Good. Good.”

*

Fiona doesn’t leave him alone for the rest of the week. It’s sweet to begin with, that someone cares, but then he starts chafing at the idea that she’s watching him, thinking things that she won’t say and eventually after she’s followed him into the kitchen he rounds on her and says: “You know you can leave me alone. I’m not going to try again.”

She blinks. “I wasn’t...”

“Yes, you were.”

A sigh, a deflation. “I’m sorry. I’ve just...been worried...”

What can he say to that? Of course she’s been worried. He ducks his head, looks at the bandages on his wrists. “Sorry,” he says, briefly, tasting the word on his tongue.

“Nothing to be sorry for,” she replies, but it’s brittle, and a moment later she leaves the room.

*

“And he could have been successful, Roger, I can’t I just...”

JD sits on the stairs with the cup of tea from his room, the bandages thick around his wrists. They sting, and his head throbs. He doesn’t know why he’s eavesdropping again, but it’s better than being sat all alone upstairs, the voices screaming about failure in his head. He’s trying not to listen to them, he really is (he promised, he promised, he promised) but it’s like trying to close out a rock concert, one that judders through your bones and drowns out any

sense of sanity. Sometimes it's more of a feeling than a hearing, and there's no way you can close your skin off.

"It's okay, Fiona..."

"No, it's not! I should've seen this coming, I should have done something more, I..."

"You *know* people who are suicidal don't talk about things. You *know* that, love."

Footsteps; JD stiffens, twists around, wonders where he can bolt, but then it's just Mary, her glasses crammed on wonky, wrapped up in her dressing gown and holding the cat. "Hey," she says, after a moment. "Guess I shouldn't go into the kitchen, then?"

"Perhaps not now," he says, and then instead of turning around and going back upstairs like he expects her to – Mary's always been shy around him – she plonks herself down. The cat twists out of her arms and steps into JD's lap, rubbing its head against his chin, settling down in a warm bundle of fur. JD stares down at it in shock.

"Mopsy always knows when people are upset," Mary says. "When I had a fight with my best friend he wouldn't let me put him down all day. Most cats do. It's like how animals can feel earthquakes before we do."

"Really?"

"Yeah. We learned about it in geography class."

"You like geography?"

[In the kitchen: "I couldn't've lived with myself if he'd managed. What kind of guardian am I if I can't even...god..."]

"I'm taking him out for coffee tomorrow. It'll be alright, I promise."]

"Yeah. I want to be an earthquake scientist."

"Seismologist," JD corrects her, and she grins at him, suddenly.

"Yeah, that. What do you want to be? You're gonna leave school soon."

"No idea," he says, after a moment. "College, I guess."

If you're even good enough for college, god, the voice says. He shivers, and Mopsy purrs louder, its claws digging into his knee.

"It'll be okay," Mary insists, eyes wide and bright in the darkness. In the kitchen, Fiona has heaved a huge, gusty sigh.

"Yeah," he says, unconvinced.

June 1995 // 23 years old

He gets in from work to find Zoe curled up on their bed, her hair wrapped up and wearing one of his sweaters, and he takes a moment to look at her, to marvel at this life he's somehow built for himself, at the fact that she's here and it seems like she wants to stick around, and this is nothing like what he'd imagined his future, but...he could get used to this. He could definitely get used to this. She looks up from her book. "Something for you on the kitchen table," she says. "How was work?"

"Eh, the same as usual. Nothing interesting. You?"

"Yeah, the read-through went well. Rest of the cast seem nice. There's this one girl I think I'm going to be good friends with."

"Hey, that's good news...what is this?"

"I saw it, on the noticeboard at the theatre. Was thinking you could apply, perhaps."

"I'm not going to get first violin," he tells her. She scoffs.

"Really? Cause from someone who's seen you play...hoo boy. You're definitely first violin material."

"You're my girlfriend, you're supposed to say these things."

"And as a qualified, trained performer in her own right?"

"Yes, yes, okay. I'll think about it."

"Damn right you will."

He sighs and goes over to give her a kiss. "Thank you for thinking of me."

"That means you're not going to do it."

"Maybe."

She raises an eyebrow at him and goes back to her book. He tries to ignore the sudden resurgence of the voices, whispering somewhere just out of sight. *Breathe*, he reminds himself. Just breathe. It'll be okay. You don't have to do it.

*

February 1990 // 17 years old

He stares at Veronica's retreating back and the desperation is setting his head spinning. Vaguely, he's aware of things collapsing in his brain, and it takes all his strength not to collapse to the floor with it, to stay standing. He's still holding the gun and he stares at it, at the metallic glint, wonders about putting it in his mouth and ending all of this but he's frozen,

and he can't and some tiny, screaming part of himself is clinging onto life with both hands, and he can't, not like this, not this way...

She's going to pay, for this, for the poison she's let loose in his bloodstream, for the pain he'd thought he had all bottled safely away, hidden behind Slurpees and classic books and his indomitable coat. He'd thought she was his saviour but then, no, not saviour, she's Judas, she's his downfall, she's...he belatedly realises he's pacing his room, the floorboards squeaking and the gun digging into his hand and...but no, what if...what if it's them, not her...Veronica could never have done this without help, she loves him, he knows she does, and people in love don't just...they don't...

It's them. They're the problem. They all have to go. He sits heavily on his camp-bed, stares at the wall. It'll be okay, he tells himself. He can do this. He'll get Veronica back.

*

What happens at the end of the world?

Or, more importantly, what happens *after*?

*

August 1995 // 23 years old

Dear Mr Dean,

After your stellar audition, we are delighted to offer you the position of assistant first violinist with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra. Please see details included with this letter, and give us a call as soon as possible to let us know whether you will accept or decline this offer...

*

April 1990 // 18 years old

The second they get back into the house, Roger disappears into the kitchen, and JD goes upstairs, playing their conversation back in his head, over and over. The way Roger had leaned over the table, quiet, earnest, gentle. The weight, easing ever-so-slightly, the voices as though someone had finally found the volume control inside his head. He opens the door to his room, hovers for a moment, unsure of where he goes from here, how to step, whether the ground will collapse back out from under him again.

After a moment, he makes up his mind, and crosses the room, unzipping his violin case and taking a deep, aching breath. He picks it up, swings it under his chin...

...and starts to play.

//End//

End Notes

Eschatology is "the study of the end of the world," something we happened across in class and I thought fit JD's character really well. I suppose you'd call this a character excavation; I wrote it to get my head around him, so yeah. There will most likely be a sequence of outtakes that I wanted to fit in but didn't work to go along with it. I am also aware I stretch out the events of Heathers by quite a significant amount, but just indulge me on that one!

He plays Danse Macabre by Camille Saint-Saens, which I would highly recommend interested people check out, it's spine-tingling. Also...Lindsay Stirling became a big inspiration writing this (thanks Marie!), but I don't think JD dances as much as she does!

Update, 10/03/22 - thanks to love_yourself_1358 who had the excellent headcanon that Zoe is actually Zoe Murphy from Dear Evan Hansen, and that is who she is in my head too :D

As always would love to chat Heathers with anyone, so tumblr/scream with me: @if-fortunate

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!