

# Elijah.

\*\*Trigger warning: references to suicide

All-nighters. They were fun, weren't they?

It'd all start when you'd find yourself awake at one of the hours of the devil.

You'd anxiously watch each of those stretching hours, each passing minute, and then each fleeting second.

Time would be slipping through your fingers, but at some point, you'd stop trying to hold on.

That was when the fun would start.

It wouldn't matter what you were up doing. Everything always felt different when you were doing it when even the damn *stars* were probably sleeping.

Not every all-nighter was like that, though.

Some of them were the opposite.

They always seemed to happen completely against your will.

You wanted them to end? They'd say no.

You wanted to have even a little fun? No.

You just wanted to *sleep*? *No*.

I called them *No-Nighters*.

They pushed you into a raging sea of emotions you didn't want to face. And while you were busy trying to get your head above water, they stole your sleep.

The ungodly hour wouldn't excite you, making everything feel different in a way that you wouldn't mind. The time would only make everything worse when you felt it couldn't possibly be, just another thing you had to worry about. Another weight stacked on already shaky shoulders. Like drinking a glass of water while drowning.

Just too much.

Because these weren't all-nighters.

These were No-Nighters. No sleep, no fun, no end.

Tonight was one of those nights.

I was stuck in a no-nighter.

And I'd gone through enough of them to know not to try getting out.

So I only continued smoking out the open window of my bedroom door.

It seemed to be the only thing my brain—which felt like goo at the moment— could focus on.

The way each puff of smoke burst into the sky, vanishing almost as soon as it appeared.

The evidence of my self destruction, disappearing right into thin air.

If only this no-nighter could do the same.

Why the hell did they all have to be so stubborn?

It was three in the morning.

*Give me a break.*

My brain had been reduced to goo, so now it couldn't tell my legs to take me to my bed.

Though it wouldn't have made a difference.

My legs felt like jello.

Knowing that I could only smoke my way through this familiar ordeal, I took another swig.

It wasn't this big deal of a thing; smoking. My mom did it, with my dad's objection at first. Though I didn't really have a reason to start. But I also didn't have a reason to stop. But I now had a reason to *continue*. Kids at school thought it was cool. But I didn't. I wished I didn't have to smoke multiple times every week just to *feel* something. The burn in my throat reminded me that I was still human, that I could still feel, that I wasn't some lifeless zombie. But despite all that, I wanted to stop.

But just because you wanted something didn't mean you could have it.

Suddenly the elephant in the room became even more apparent.

Something I wanted but just couldn't seem to have: *happiness*.

Before my therapist knew I had depression, she told me happiness was something I had to wait for to walk into my life.

*After* learning I had depression, she told me happiness was something I had to chase after unrelentingly.

I had a giant weight on my back, a weight that made it so difficult to take even one step forward, yet so easy to tumble back so many steps.

Not a bag that I could put down when I'd had enough, but a giant elephant, where I'd get crushed if I even *tried* to put it down.

It was either bare it or end it all when I couldn't anymore.

And yet, with that weight on my back, my therapist wanted me to run after something when I could barely crawl.

And I really did want to chase after happiness, until I had it in such a tight grip that it would never be able to leave me again.

But it felt out of my reach, like it was in another world entirely.

If I felt like all I could do, all I'd ever be *able* to do, was wonder.

Wonder what it was like to be *happy*.

I wanted to be able to look forward to Fridays because they were a break, not dread them knowing they were only like every other day.

I wanted to be able to sleep at such a reasonable time that I wouldn't think of it past *midnight* as *early*.

I wanted to have a hobby, a passion, something I could do for comfort that wasn't giving myself lung cancer.

I wanted to not have to *smoke* to find happiness, which wasn't really happiness at all, only temporary relief.

I wanted to enjoy things like everyone else.

I wanted to be able to do things that seemed so *easy* for everyone else.

I wanted to not have depression like everyone else.

Like *him*.

Younger me. A younger, happier Elijah.

*Where did he go?*

And as usual, as the no-nighter started to really do its work and I started to drown, he appeared, a raft in this sea of endless hopelessness.

Pete.

My giant teddy bear friend.

He wasn't real, by the way.

Yet at the same time, he was the realest there was.

He was an interesting guy, my imaginary friend. Pete never seemed to talk much, from the moment he came to life when I was seven.

But I knew it was because every word the guy spoke had meaning.

He would never beat around the bush. He'd instead use just a few, well calculated chops.

He used little words because he only used words that *had* to be said.

Though it didn't make him cold in the slightest, how little he talked.

It made him sturdy and reliable, despite his undeniable softness.

"Pete,"

That was how I knew I could ask him what had lodged its way into my mind.

"Where did my happiness go?"

Another thing about Pete: his expressions always said it all. That was another reason he used few words: his expressions conveyed the meaning in them better than any extra words probably could.

And so he gave me an answer with one of those expressions. It was like you could see every strand of fake fur come to life as he gave me a soft smile, though I could tell he was feeling excited by the little bounce of his brows.

Very plushy brows, which made the bounce even more visible.

And it turned out the answer to my question didn't have any words, not even a few.

Only a plushy finger clearly pointing to under my bed.

And though it made no sense for my happiness to have gone under my bed as if it could grow legs and walk under there, that was yet another thing about Pete:

You had to trust the process with him.

And that I did.

I only gave my fluffy friend a confused look for about a second before I sluggishly crawled over to my bed.

And I started searching, showing him each and every random object I found buried beneath the void under my bed.

A candy wrapper? Pete gave me a shake of his head.

A five dollar bill? Another shake of his head.

A sheet of bubble wrap? (that I got way too excited about) An amused shake of his head.

An empty pizza box? A shake of his head.

A sock that nearly made me gag with its smell? A deadpan look.

The longer I searched, the more eager I became to be holding my happiness in my hand.

And when my hand awkwardly closed around smooth paper, it seemed I'd found it.

I pulled it out from under the bed and brought it up to my eyes, and I was looking at three faces.

Three *happy* faces.

Mine was one of them.

But it wasn't seeing *my* face that made my fingers start to shake just a little.

Because in my hands I was holding a picture of the two people that had been two bright, smiling suns in my cloudy sky.

In that picture, along with myself, Adam and Myla smiled back at me.

And then, as quickly as this no-nighter managed to turn my mind to goo, it clicked: the key to my treasure chest.

It got the gears working in my mind of goo, and I could tell the all-nighter was going to win again: the possibility of getting any sleep had been blown out the window along with the smoke I coped with.

And *in* from the window came a memory.

"You can't just push us away, Elijah!"

"I *have* to, Adam."

"Slow *down*, Elijah! You're scaring Adam."

"I *can't*, Myla."

"You're not hurting us!"

"I *am*."

"You're *not*. You just need help. Just stay, Elijah. Stay."

"I... can't."

"*Why* not? Why do you *have* to leave us?"

"Because *you* guys won't leave me, even when I'm gone."

They'd gone silent then.

Because they knew.

Everything changed since the day my depression had pushed and shoved at me enough to nearly end my life.

And though I could've just ran as fast as I could and made it even a little bit easier, I'd stayed.

It had been some part of me, hoping that they'd tell me I was wrong. That they *didn't* need me.

That they'd know when to give up on me.

But when I finally stopped and turned around to look at my friends, who I'd spent a good hour trying to walk away from, I was only met with their tear-stained faces.

The word "stay" was leaving their mouths before I'd even heard it.

*Stay.*

*Stay.*

*Stay.*

But I *couldn't* stay.

And as I started walking away again, my saddened friends' cries of my name made my heart heavy, and the sidewalk seemed to swallow my feet, everything trying to get me to stay when I *knew* I had to go.

So I kept on moving forward.

And I told them to never talk to me again.

I stared at Pete in both awe and horror.

This had been it.

Adam and Myla had been my happiness.

And I'd cut it right in half.

I didn't have to check with Pete to know that this picture with its edges beginning to curl up was exactly what he'd meant for me to find when he'd pointed his furry finger at under my bed.

I thought about how Pete had changed along with me as I stared at his fluffy, brown face. He used to crush me in his overwhelmingly comforting Pete Hugs when I was younger, and now

stayed back and gave me space now that I was older. It was like I was looking at a softer, fluffier version of myself.

So why did he look the most deflated I'd ever seen him?

And if pushing my closest friends away to protect them was *actually* protecting them, why was it that the only time Myla seemed happy was when she was asleep during class? And why was it that the only time Adam seemed at peace was when he'd be so immersed in scribbling away at his notebook that he couldn't even register someone talking to him?

And why was it that the only time I was happy was when I smoked cigarettes that I was too young to be the owner of?

What had I *done*?

I turned over the picture and felt a pang in my heart.

Because on the back of the picture, written first in Adam's perfect printing, then Myla's loose writing, and then mine, almost unreadable, but still clear, was:

"Always."

It was a promise we'd made, and I'd broken it.

Life wasn't easy, but on those peaceful walks to school, and while feeling the same confusion trying to figure out math, and sharing that bone-crushing hug I got just for still being alive, we were *happier*.

Adam, Myla and I: we had been happier *together*.

"Go get 'em, Elijah."

I nodded at my furry friend.

I knew what I had to do.

I was so glad the three of us still went to school together. Because even though I had cut my happiness in half on that day, it didn't *have* to be too late.

I could still put the pieces back together.

It could have as much of my sleep as it wanted, but my happiness was one thing I wouldn't let a no-nighter steal from me.

In amazement, I stared at Pete, who was sitting on my bed across from me. I felt so much gratitude for that damn giant teddy bear I might as well have had hearts in my eyes. He watched me with a warm smile and a quirk of his plushy brow.

"You want a Pete Hug, don't you?"

That hadn't been what I was staring at him for, but it was probably what I wanted without even knowing, and who was I to object?